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By Ta-Nehisi Coates

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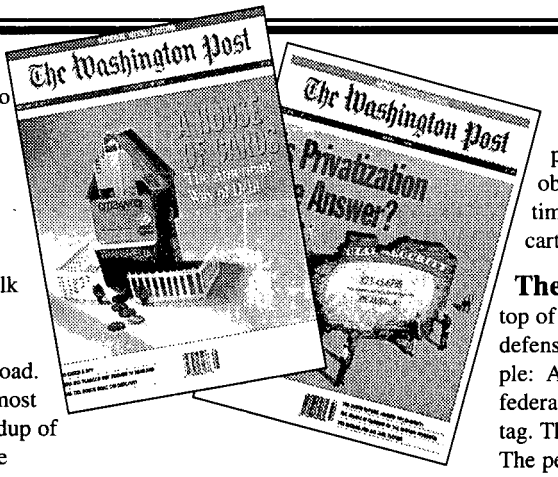

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Letters

Keeping The Peace

I read with interest and approval Jonathan Rowe's article entitled "Reach Out And Annoy Someone" (November 2000) via *Guardian Unlimited's* weblog. Cell phones—or mobiles as they are known in the UK—are an equally large problem here.

I have to admit to owning a mobile for security reasons, as I often travel late at night, but I leave it switched off. I have vowed never to become one of those sad individuals who measures his or her self-worth by the number of calls received during a train journey.

The "quiet coach" idea has been put into practice on some trains here in response to consumer demand. I commute to London on Virgin trains, which feature one quiet coach, where mobiles, and sometimes personal stereos, are banned. Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't. Usually businessmen bring their phones in and lay them on the table, oblivious to the numerous "quiet coach" signs and dirty looks from the anti-mobile brigade. It is usually dependent on the determination and boldness of this group to ensure that anyone whose phone is rung is swiftly asked to leave, with varying degrees of politeness.

I have sat in a quiet coach filled with trilling mobiles, or, as happened last night, a silent carriage. This was prompted by one brave soul who shouted at some boorish businessman yapping into his mobile, which had the superb effect of putting the fear of God into all potential mobile users. When I am forced to get on a train without a quiet coach, my only satisfaction is watching people get disconnected from their caller as the train passes into a tunnel.

JANE PERRONE
United Kingdom

Lest We Forget

Re: "The Ghost of Tom Joad," November 2000. I would like to thank the author for a very insightful analysis into what is happening with attitudes today toward the poor and less fortunate. Memories of poverty also fade with success. How few of us admit to the role of luck because we sound so much superior by saying it was the result of hard work and greater talent! The article was excellent. It will be my Christmas mailer.

JOHN BALOG
Goose Creek, S.C.

Re: "The Ghost of Tom Joad," November 2000. I am raising a young child, and he knows about recycling and helping others. He knows why he should give away a Pokemon card every now and then when trading with our neighbors who don't have as much as him. He knows what Goodwill sells and why the Salvation Army exists. Sadly, lots of kids don't—and their parents seem to pretend they don't either. Maybe we live in a society that has turned toward "ME" instead of community.

Look at money for example: The more you have, the more you want, the less you give others. This was cited in the article with the state of Massachusetts versus the state of Mississippi. Here, we are gearing up for a Hunger Awareness Banquet, where your number will decide your financial status at the door. One high-school student even slept in a box on the side of the road to raise donations of food, etc. I don't think these activities truly impress upon people what it's really like to be in poverty. Of course moral judgments cloud the picture too.

Keep up the good work! The article was great and I'm forwarding it to friends!

JENNIFER GRENTZER, BSW
Paducah, Ky.

Enforcing The Court

"Contempt of Court" by Jonathan Tepperman in the November 2000 issue of *The Washington Monthly* is certainly an eloquent argument for the establishment of a strong international court of justice. However, a question which it does not seem to address is whether such a court can be made truly effective if there is no international code of law. Tepperman does seems to be putting the cart before the horse. Except for certain brief periods of history when one sovereign power dominated most of the known world, there has never been universal agreement on such a code of law. One such period was just after World War II, when the United States, Britain, and the Soviet Union more or less ruled the world, and clearly defined, for example, what a war criminal was. In other words, unless some form of world government much stronger than our present United Nations is established, I cannot see that an international court of justice could be very effective.

GEORGE SEIFERT
Ames, Iowa

Get With The Programs

Your article "Finding The Civil Service's Hidden Sex Appeal" (November 2000) has a major flaw. The current government organization is obsolete. Jobs that ought to be done mechanically are done by hand. The few automated processes are hindered by islands of automation that cannot talk to each other. People must bridge these gaps by taking information from one process and entering it into another. The United States government ought to be well down the road to electronic government. This would allow people to conduct government business at their convenience, not the convenience of some bureaucrat. Implementation of electronic government would allow a civil service no more than half the size of the current establishment to provide a much higher level of service to the American people.

JACK HALEY
Warner Robins, Ga.

The Political Bind

Your "West Wing" article ("Tilting At Windmills," November 2000) assumes that if people realize that there are a lot of "good" people in politics, they may not be so cynical or apathetic towards it. I don't think you

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see the real problem.

A politician can be "good," a decent person, and so on (for example, I think Ronald Reagan was) and still advocate things that are not good for our country. Also, good people often have the tendency to believe in the things that seem to bring them financial prosperity, power, and success. For example, notice how George Bush Sr. changed his position on a woman's right to choose in order to become Reagan's vice president. (Ronnie also changed when running for president instead of governor.)

The problem is the people that tell things as they are without partisanship—the people with ideas to make things better from the bottom up and the people who won't give up their idealism to take money from the powerful—get filtered out by the Democrats and the GOP the higher they seek to go. This is because they threaten the status quo and, therefore, the party machine. Those who do seem to rise above the party rhetoric are attacked by both sides of the aisle till they get with the program. Witness the change in Clinton from when he first came into office and now. In other words, the people that make it to the top don't command or deserve much admiration.

CARL GRANADOS
Boca Raton, Fla.

Rights & Religions

Ben Soskis, in his review of Prof. Stephen L. Carter's latest book, *God's Name In Vain*, was far too gentle in his criticisms. Anyone like Prof. Carter who argues that he has a system of *knowing* other than by the customary modes of logic and evidence is making an absurd statement.

Since humankind began, it is estimated that those strange creatures known as *homo sapiens* have invented over 100,000 different religions. What reasonable grounds can Carter make that he has chosen the right one from all the others?

Carter postulates the existence of an all-powerful, all-knowing, all-loving God if he accepts the standard Christian version. By what means did he arrive at this "truth"? Would he have come to the same conclusion if he had been born in a non-Christian culture?

Most of humanity has in its 10,000 years or so of civilization lived in non-Christian cultures. Can Carter even make a defensible case that Christian beliefs, true or not, have really meant a genuine improvement in the human condition?

The Christian religion as currently practiced in America has a very mixed history in terms of supporting evils such as slavery and segregation, suppression of labor's and women's rights, and neglecting to support many other parts of a social agenda that most intellectuals would label as necessary for the good society. Ben Soskis missed an opportunity.

ROBERT PRIMACK
Gainesville, Fla.

Misplaced Blame

Contrary to the popular view in the media ("Tilting at Windmills," December 2000), Ariel Sharon did not provoke the riots that exploded into a mini-war with now nearly 300 deaths. His visit to the Temple Mount was prearranged with the knowledge of the Palestinian Authority leaders. Instead of what should have been a peaceful trip by Sharon to the holiest site in Judaism, Palestinian Arabs, with the full backing of Yasser Arafat, had stockpiled rocks and boulders on the Temple Mount to be used the next day to attack Israeli worshippers on the Sabbath at the Western Wall.

Israeli police attempted to protect Jewish worshippers, but to no avail, as Jews were driven from their Sabbath services by a hail of rocks. Casualties were sustained on both sides, but Arafat, seeking political gain, fed the fire of the riots with inflammatory statements that led to violence with the resultant terrible toll as his military raised the stakes by firing at Israeli police and civilians. Who instigated the riots? The answer is clear: Yasser Arafat, who was willing and anxious to sacrifice Palestinian lives for his own personal agenda.

NELSON MARANS
Silver Spring, Md.

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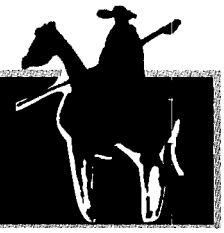
Tilting at Windmills



BY CHARLES PETERS

Drunken Pilots• Keystone Cops• Snobbish Diplomats

Balls and Strikes • W. as Prince John• Scalia as the Sheriff of Nottingham

IN FOOTBALL, THERE IS A penalty for delay of game. How I yearned for a similar political rule during the five weeks between Election Day and the Supreme Court decision that ended it all. Bush's tactic of delay worked over and over again, day after day, right up to its triumphant moment when the Supreme Court didn't penalize the tactic but rewarded it by saying to Gore: "Time's up. Whatever the merit of your case, the game is over tonight. There's not time for any recount."

The story behind Bush's delays should challenge investigative reporters and historians for years to come. Don Van Natta Jr. and Dexter Filkings of *The New York Times* have already come up with some fascinating clues to what happened in Miami-Dade, where the recount was off, then on, then reduced in size, and finally, called off, a few days before the Florida Supreme Court's deadline. The villains appeared to include the mob sent from Washington by the aptly named Tom DeLay, and two of the canvassing board members, David Leahy and Myriam Lehr, both of whom need Cuban American voters to retain judgeships and both of whom rely on the same Republican consultant Armando Gutierrez. Then there's Alex Penelas, the mayor of Miami, who the *Times* says is seriously considering becoming a Republican and running for Congress in a Hispanic-dominated district and who was in "constant contact" with Lawrence King, the Miami-Dade supervisor of elections and the third member of the board.

Less investigating has been done into Palm Beach County's delays. I would urge reporters to look at Bruce Rogow, the county attorney who counseled delay, and

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at the canvassing board chair Judge Charles Burton, who managed to drag out the count until Katherine Harris had an excuse to refuse to honor it, and who also had a suspicious aversion to dimpled ballots, despite having been twice urged by local courts to take a more sympathetic approach to voter intent. The conclusive evidence that Judge Burton is not one of the white hats came when he was called "a great American" by none other than Judge N. Sanders Sauls.

On his own, Sauls succeeded in delaying a recount for seven crucial days. Then he concluded there was no evidence to support Gore, even though an important Bush expert witness had testified that hand recounts made sense in close elections, and not to mention the fact that he refused to look at the main Gore evidence, the disputed ballots, and that he continually cut off David Boies when Boies seemed on the verge of making a telling point. Counting the time it took the Supreme Court of Florida to reverse Sauls, he is actually responsible for holding up the recount for not just seven but 11 days.

But the ultimate villain, the Sheriff of Nottingham who has totally sold out to the usurping Prince John, is Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia. He had been a lifelong champion of states' rights until this case, when he ruled for the supremacy of the federal judiciary. A lifelong opponent of judicial excess, he managed to say that the only legal standard, "irreparable harm," that would have justified staying the Florida recount applied to this case. Stays are granted when an innocent man will be hanged, or a beautiful forest will be cut down. The only harm of recounts would have been that Bush would be shown to be the loser.

That he would have lost and Gore would have won seems to have been confirmed by subsequent analysis of election results by both the *Orlando Sentinel* and the *Miami Herald*. But perhaps the most convincing evidence that Gore would have won lies in the ferocious tenacity with which the Bush forces resisted a recount.

To Gore's great credit, he

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sought the fairest solution of all: a hand recount of all counties, Democratic and Republican. Bush's failure to take him up on this proposal is why history will regard him as another Prince John. The only consolation I can offer is that I think it's safe to assume that Bush won't do what John did when he became king: authorize the assassination of the legitimate heir to the throne!

••••••••

HERE ARE THE LATEST BULLETINS from the world of the affluent. First, it should be noted, there are a lot of them. According to *Money* magazine, one out of seven American families earns more than $100,000 annually. All this wealth is creating new jobs. For example, Wendy Lewis has become a plastic surgery consultant. She charges $175 an hour to advise clients on the physician most likely to match their needs for breast lifts or tummy tucks. And some old professions are undergoing dramatic growth. Private bankers who serve customers with $1 million or more have seen their business increase from $77 billion in 1994 to $270 billion last year. Luxury retailers are also doing very well. Gucci sales run around $3,000 per square foot as opposed to $300 a square foot at an average department store. You'll understand the difference when you learn that Gucci is charging $165 for a pair of baby's booties and $4,250 for a toddler's mink coat.

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MY HAPPIEST MEMORIES OF MY son's childhood are the things we enjoyed doing together. One was watching "Hogan's Heroes." I was reminded of the show by the recent death of Werner Klemperer, whose performance as the inept camp commandant, Colonel Klink, was a comic masterpiece. The politically correct were offended by the show. "How can you make comedy out of the Nazis?" they asked indignantly. The answer isn't just "Hogan's Heroes." It's also Charlie Chaplin's *The Great Dictator*, Roberto Benigni's *Life is Beautiful*, and above all, Mel Brooks' *The Producers*.

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WE HARP ON THE INEFFICIENCIES of the criminal justice system not just because they are embarrassing, but because they mean that too many dangerous criminals get away with it. As usual, the situation is worse in the District of Columbia. In six out of every 10 killings in Washington last year, the perpetrator remains free, according to a recent series of articles by *The Washington Post*'s Barbara Vobejda and Ira Chinoy. "If you feel like you can commit a murder and not get caught, you're going to do it," observes Carl Gregory, a former D.C. detective.

Liberals should join the NRA. Then they could outvote the gun nuts.

Indeed, you may well decide to do it again: 225 of the murders in the city during the last decade were perpetrated by people police believe had committed an earlier one. Of those, 125 had been arrested the first time but avoided conviction because of various inefficiencies and mistakes by police, prosecutors, and judges, not to mention witness intimidation. Foul-ups by the system are a major factor in causing witnesses to fear testifying. If they speak up and the police, prosecutors, and courts fail to convict, the murderers are free to come after them. "In at least 17 homicides over the last decade," write Vobejda and Chinoy, "police identified the motive as witness elimination. Other police and court records suggest the number is even higher."

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THIRTEEN DAYS, THE NEW movie about the Cuban Missile Crisis, is a triumphant demonstration that movies don't have to embroider history to make it interesting. It comes as close to the truth as any "docudrama" that I've seen, and it is totally absorbing. Its only fault is that it probably overstates Ken O'Donnell's role—possibly because he's played by Kevin Costner—but even that distortion corrects the error of historians, who are ignorant of Kenny's usually crucial role in the Kennedy administration. He was the closest to a chief of staff that JFK had, and he was trusted completely by both Jack and Bobby.

Thirteen Days also gets the story of JFK's offer to remove our missiles from Turkey right. This provided the crucial quid pro quo Krushchev needed to appease the Kremlin hawks by assuring them that the Soviet Union would get something in return for pulling its missiles out of Cuba. The *Monthly*, by the way, reported the Turkish missile story in an article by Graham Allison in our October 1972 issue. It was not until October 1987 that the mainstream press got it right.

••••••••

THE CELL PHONE, SPEAKING OF *Monthly* causes, is back in the news, this time not because it's annoying, but because it caused two people to die. John and Carole Hall had stopped their car on the shoulder of a Maryland highway so their little boy could get out and relieve himself. As they were waiting in their car, it was slammed into by a driver who lost control of his speeding car when he started to make a call on his cell phone. The driver got off with a fine because the cell phone

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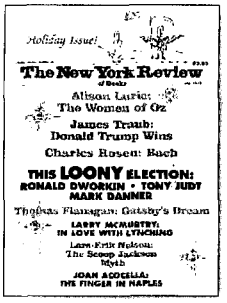

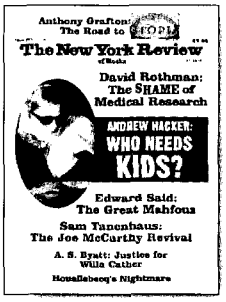

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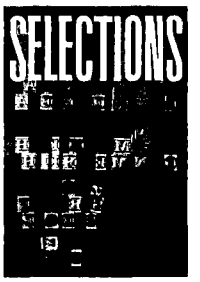

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industry has kept Maryland and other states from taking the sensible step of forbidding the use of cell phones by drivers of moving vehicles. A few local jurisdictions do have such laws. Ironically, one of them is Suffolk County, New York, where John and Carole Hall had lived.

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THE AMERICAN FOREIGN SERVICE Association is mad at the State Department. It seems that the department has dared to appoint a career civil servant—as distinguished from a career Foreign Service officer—as the No. 2 official of the U.S. Embassy in Peru. Is the civil servant in question, Roberta Jacobson, otherwise unqualified? Not at all. She is, in fact, according to John R. Hamilton, the ambassador to Peru, "The best manager I have run across in my almost 31 years of government service." She is also, according to the State Department, "an acknowledged Latin American expert." But the beef of the Foreign Service Association is that regardless of her qualifications, her job should go to a member of the Foreign Service. The association is dead wrong. It's hard enough to find good people to fill government jobs without insisting that they have to be members of the Foreign Service.

Foreign Service officers tend to think they are automatically more qualified than other civil servants or political appointees. While it's true that, by virtue of their training, experience, and the difficult examinations passed, they are especially qualified to serve abroad, sometimes a civil servant or political appointee is equally or better qualified. The automatic assumption of superiority is a manifestation of the snobbery that has long been a characteristic of the Foreign Service.

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BACK TO ANOTHER *MONTHLY* cause. We do have a lot of them, don't we? This time, it's the danger presented by the failure to adequately regulate what is called general aviation, but which most people recognize as the world of private planes. The latest news comes from the National Transportation Safety Board which, after investigating the Payne Stewart crash, found that the 7,000 business jets now flown in the United States are inadequately regulated, and that the Stewart plane was flown with flaws that should have kept it grounded. "Its operator did not keep proper records of the mechanical problems," writes Matthew Wald of *The New York Times*. "The FAA did not spot the problem with the charter operator." One difficulty with business jets, writes Wald, is that "regulators had been confused because of the growth in 'fractional ownership,' in which people or companies share ownership of a plane as if it were a time-share condominium." It is irritating if the previous user of the condo fails to fix a leaky faucet, but it can be deadly if he fails to fill an empty oxygen bottle on a jet.

In six out of ten killings in Washington last year, the perpetrator remains free.

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IF YOU DOUBTED OUR STATEMENT in Stephen Pomper's recent article on general aviation that a private pilot could be drunk and still be allowed to get in his plane and take off, consider the case of David Nickerson, who recently mistook a Maryland road for a runway. After landing the plane on the road, according to the *Associated Press*, he "asked bystanders to stop traffic so he could take off again." Police found three open whiskey bottles in the plane.

Since Nickerson happened to land on a highway, police were able to charge him with possession of an open container of alcohol on a public road and negligent driving. But if he had landed at a general aviation airport, nothing would have been done. No one checks pilots' condition when they board or leave their planes. No one checks what they carry on the plane or what they take from it.

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THOSE BROKERAGE analysts that you see being respectfully interviewed on CNBC are not the most reliable investment counselors, particularly when it comes to ferreting out bad news about the companies whose stocks they cover. Consider the case of computer giant Gateway. The recent one-day loss of $3 billion in its stock value came as a shock to all but one analyst who covered the company, according to Gretchen Morgenson of *The New York Times*. Instead of being tough critics, most analysts suck up to management. In a conference call just before the stock fell, six of the analysts involved "were careful to congratulate Gateway" before asking any questions.

One reason brokers tend to be bullish may be that if they talk you into buying a stock, they have two potential commissions: one when you buy and another when you sell. If they are bearish and encourage you to sell, only one commission is possible—unless of course, they're bullish enough on another stock to persuade you to buy it.

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DID YOU READ ABOUT THE recent riots in India? They were caused by an order by its supreme

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court to shut down polluting factories. The catch is that the factories employ close to a million people. Since I'm from West Virginia, I'm familiar with the problem. So is Al Gore. Workers' fear of environmentalism was a factor in his loss of the state in November. As one local politician observed, if the Statue of Liberty were in West Virginia, we'd melt it down for jobs.

An even bigger factor in Gore's loss of West Virginia, and also, I suspect, of Tennessee and Arkansas, was Charlton Heston. The National Rifle Association's president has become a dangerously effective arouser of the anxieties of hunters. He convinces them that regulation of handguns is sure to lead to regulation of hunting rifles and shotguns. If the Democrats don't figure out a way to counter Heston, we're in for more tough times at the polls in states where hunting is close to a religion. I like one solution offered by a character on "The West Wing" a few weeks ago: Liberals should all join the NRA, then they could outvote the gun nuts at the NRA convention and throw Heston out.

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LOUIS FARRAKHAN IS NOT NOW and never has been one of my heroes. Why then are we publishing an article about him? Because it helps us understand why Farrakhan has been an important figure to black America. To black men in particular, Farrakhan has been a proud symbol of standing up to whitey. This article provides an insightful account not only of how Farrakhan became that symbol but also of his subsequent decline and the resulting loss to the black community.

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MICHAEL GRUNWALD OF *The Washington Post* has won a lot of praise, including our Monthly Journalism Award, for his series on the Army Corps of Engineers. But he must be proudest of the fact that even the Army admits he was right. Last month, the Army inspector general released a report confirming that the Corps had altered a study to reverse its conclusion that the cost of a $1 billion lock expansion on the Mississippi River would outweigh its benefits.

After the Corps allowed shipping and agribusiness companies that wanted the expansion to tinker with the figures, the study came out saying that the expansion was a dandy idea. The inspector general concluded, according to the *Associated Press*, that the Corps officials' behavior was prompted by a desire to boost the organization's construction budget. If you want to understand the origin of most bureaucratic sins, look to the budget. Increasing it means more jobs, more promotions, nicer offices, and, most of all, freedom from fears of downsizing. This bureaucratic tendency is most dangerous when, as in the case of the Corps, the increased budget comes from doing the bidding of big business.

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ONE OTHER EXPLANATION OF Republicans' success at the polls—in congressional races at least—comes from the political analyst Stuart Rothenberg. He says the Republican candidates woke up to the fact that they couldn't get away with seeming indifferent to voters' concerns about education, prescription drugs, a patient's bill of rights, and Social Security, so they offered their own programs in each of these areas. Their programs might have had little merit but nonetheless made the Republican candidates seem to care.

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SPEAKING OF THE DOT-COM SET, there are a couple of other recent reports that inspire concern. Drug use among the technological elite has turned Silicon Valley into today's equivalent of Haight-Ashbury in the 1960s. "Drugs are the dirty little secret of the dot-com world," a Northern California treatment center physician told P.J. Huffstutter and Robin Fields of the *Los Angeles Times*, who reported that powder cocaine and methamphetamine are the drugs preferred by the technological whiz kids.

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DOPE ISN'T THE ONLY THING TO worry about. A lot of the dot-commers have what the *Financial Times* calls "dark pasts." Here is the lead of an FT.com report by Caroline Daniel: "Internet executives are four times more likely to have 'unsavory backgrounds' than executives from other industries, according to an investigation by Kroll Associates, a corporate security company."

The backgrounds include violation of Securities and Exchange Commission rules, insurance fraud, undisclosed bankruptcies, fraud committed overseas, penny stock scams, and even links to organized crime.

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JOURNALISTS COULD DO A BETTER job if they had some experience on the inside of whatever they report about. In other words, if they're going to cover Congress, it is a good idea to spend a year or two working for a congressman. If they're going to cover the executive branch, a couple of years in the bureaucracy would give them insights into how government really works. An example of what I mean was recently explained by Richard Stengel, who took leave from his job at *Time* last year to serve in Bill Bradley's campaign. In doing so, he learned some valuable lessons about how the press covers or fails to cover politics: "I'm not saying that all campaign correspondents are indolent and superficial: just that if you want them to write a probing critique of an opponent, you'd better hand it to them on a silver platter.

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"And even if you give journalists the facts, they're often reluctant to go with them. I was constantly saying under my breath to reporters, 'Make a judgment.' Being committed to some he-said-she-said idea of 'objectivity' often makes a journalist a neutral vessel of distortion.

"Journalists spend a lot more time worrying about what other journalists think of their stories than about what readers or viewers might want or need to know. And because reporters tend not to be the most original folks, they're afraid of getting either too far ahead or too far behind."

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DAVID CAY JOHNSTON, WHO does a superb job of covering the IRS for *The New York Times*, recently uncovered a disturbing problem. Businesses are deliberately refusing to pay income taxes and withhold their employees' share of Social Security and Medicare taxes. They are thumbing their nose at the government and "bragging about it on Web sites and radio talk shows and organizing seminars to promote the gospel of defiance."

Flagrant cheating is something the IRS can't tolerate. I know Congress gives the agency far too little money for enforcement—and that amount should be increased—but the agency should still devote enough of whatever resources it has to make sure that sufficient numbers of the cheaters are prosecuted to send a meaningful message to the rest.

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GAY SCOUTMASTERS WERE THE subject of an item in my November column. I said that some gays are seriously into man-boy relationships and do not seem ideal choices for positions of influence over young Scouts. I also said I understood the outrage of a gay who is not infatuated with boys but who is denied the opportunity to serve as a Scoutmaster. As you can imagine, this item has attracted quite a few letters, three of which were published in the December issue.

Each made a good point. One pointed out that if the Scouts put gays in a position of authority, they would subject themselves to lawsuits similar to those brought against the Catholic Church on behalf of altar boys who were abused by priests. Another pointed out that overheated heterosexual males pose an equal danger to high school girls. And the third letter contended that it was not the open gay whom the Scouts should fear but the closeted gay that they won't be able to identify until it's too late.

With three open bottles of whiskey on board, David Nickerson landed his plane on a Maryland road.

The last point is emphasized by a recent incident in California. A Scout executive who defended the exclusion of gays felt that Scout's honor compelled him to admit he is gay. As a result of his honesty, he was fired. By the letter-writer's logic, by openly declaring himself he became a non-threat. But I have to acknowledge that I have known a number of open gays whom I wouldn't have wanted anywhere near my 12-year-old son. The same, of course, is true, of a number of my heterosexual friends, if I had had a daughter, which I didn't.

So here's where I come out: Hire the gays and the heterosexuals, but only after they've been screened for pedophiliac tendencies. And warn your boys and girls that a lot of otherwise splendid males have sexual desires they can't always control, so it's prudent not to get in a room alone with them, not to mention a sleeping bag.

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IF YOU'RE A BASEBALL FAN, YOU may share my confusion about the strike zone. The rule book says that the upper limit of the strike zone is "a horizontal line" between the top of the shoulders and the top of the uniform pants. Yet in recent years, I have rarely seen a strike called when the pitch is above the batter's belt. In fact, the only time such a pitch seems to be called a strike is when the batter is hitting for the team I'm rooting for, with men on base in a late inning of a close game, and it's the third strike of the third out.

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HERE, FROM *THE Washington Times*, is our candidate for Most Unsurprising Headline of the Year: "DeLay sees no use for compromises."

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ESTHER STONE, I.F. STONE'S widow, died in November. For 20 years, she helped her husband publish *I.F. Stone's Weekly*. "She was his main substantive administrative assistant, subscription manager, advertising manager, and chief cook and bottle washer," in the words of her son Jeremy. She was also a great role model for my wife and me.

Soon after we founded the *Monthly*, it became clear that rough years were ahead and that, like the *Weekly*, we would never be overstaffed. Instead of being overstaffed, we were in danger of being overwhelmed by all the work that had to be done with too few people to do it. We sought Esther's advice. She said, "Concentrate on doing what has to be done today." No counsel has helped us more. It kept our focus on essentials. Long-range planning may have suffered but we kept on managing to survive another day. ●

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What the new rich don't know about philanthropy

BY BRENDAN I. KOERNER

WHEN I WORKED IN THE NEW YORK bureau of *U.S. News & World Report*, the fax machine was constantly spewing out self-congratulatory pabulum from high-tech firms. When deadlines didn't loom, I'd occasionally entertain myself by sifting through these laughably overwrought paeans to bland "breakthroughs"—"Revenio Announces Revolutionary Dialog Marketing Software Solution!" or "Users Applaud NetLedger's Customer Service!"

As dot-com hysteria peaked, however, I noticed an increasing number of communiqués devoted to less Mammon-centric feats. Mixed in with the notes hailing venture-capital deals were salutes to geek munificence, bearing toot-our-own-horn headlines like "Sun Supports eBay's Efforts to Bridge the Digital Divide for Seniors," "Granitar Turns Red Sox Win Over Yankees Into a Hit for the Jimmy Fund," or my personal favorite, "New Economy SWAT Team Formed to Save One of Nation's Largest Dance Centers".

At least according to these self-generated press clippings, the Robber Barons 2.0 are fast earning points for entry into Paradise. Rich beyond all reason despite NASDAQ's wanton fluctuations (most either still have billions of dollars in stock or were able to cash out before the recent drop) top dot-com tycoons are funneling millions into a panoply of unobjectionable causes: education, homeless shelters, and measles vaccines for Third World infants, for example. Taking heed of Andrew Carnegie's legendary credo, "He who dies rich dies disgraced," the Baby Billionaires who've solidified their paper wealth are vowing to give it all away. "If we have a dollar or a penny when we die, we'll feel like we miscalculated," says Netscape co-founder James Barksdale, one of Silicon Valley's budding Rockefellers who has a couple of billion to his name. So, to paraphrase the first line of Christopher Hitchens' anti-Mother Theresa polemic, *The Missionary Position*, who would be so base as to pick on these computer geeks, who have promised their wealth to the needy and destitute?

Despite its clever co-optation of rhetoric befitting a Sally Struthers infomercial, the dot-com set's spotty philanthropic track record makes them an easy mark. The flurry of press releases trumpeting "e-philanthropy" and a Golden Age of giving belies a disturbing stinginess among the New Economy's young aristocracy. Their forays into charity are frequently marred by hubris or naïveté, laying bare the techno-elite's substantial disconnect from the world beyond IPOs and Pentium chips. The flowering of social responsibility among dot-commers may have all-important buzz, but for now it seems more of a public-relations confection than an honest-to-goodness trend.

A slew of figures attest to the geeks' relative close-fistedness. Dot-com flacks gleefully point out that charitable giving leapt by over $15.9 billion between 1998 and 1999. But that simple stat obscures a Scroogishness among the very wealthiest Americans.

Despite the past decade's gangbusters economy and the attendant widening of the wealth gap, charitable donations remain stuck at around two percent of the U.S. gross domestic product. Among Silicon Valley households, which have prospered far more than most, the ratio of giving to income is just 2.1 percent, scarcely distinguishable from the national average and well below the figures for such down-at-the-heels states as Alabama (2.5 percent) and Idaho (2.4 percent). Of those Silicon Valley households with a net worth in excess of $1 million, a whopping 45 percent give less than $2,000 per year, a number that takes into account non-cash gifts like stock options.

Nationwide, Americans earning over $100,000 per year give an average of 2.2 percent of their incomes to charity, a drop from the 3-percent rate of six years ago. Apparently ignorant of the age-old slogan "Give until it hurts," upper-class donors rarely flirt with even a moment's discomfort when it comes to philanthropy. Claude Rosenberg, author of *Wealthy and Wise: How You*

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and America Can Get the Most Out of Your Giving, estimates that Americans with annual incomes above the $100,000 mark could increase their giving sixfold without hampering their ability to cruise about in leather-interiored SUVs and eat mail-order steaks, for those raking in more than $1 million, giving could be upped 10 times.

Corporate America has been equally reluctant to share its unprecedented wealth. Companies currently donate around one percent of pre-tax profits to charity, a substantial decrease from the 1.5 percent average of the recession-plagued early 1990s. Those that deign to dole out assets often do so by offering pre-IPO stock in lieu of cash. An almost no-lose situation for startups, stock donations are dubious propositions for recipient nonprofits as the dot-com shakeout kicks into high gear. One New Economy laggard, the youth Web-site operator Snowball.com, celebrated its NASDAQ debut by giving the Community Foundation Silicon Valley 100,000 shares. From a high of $20, however, the share price has tumbled to under $1. Per federal law, of course, Snowball.com's tax write-off is based on the stock's artificially bloated inaugural price, rewarding the company for giving when the going was good.

Venture Philanthropy

Pauline Borsook, author of *Cyberselfish: A Critical Romp Through the Terribly Libertarian Culture of High Tech*, has damned miserly dot-commers as stunningly hard-hearted, even by the Gordon Gekko standards of Reagan-era Wall Street. "Unlike those who make their money from speculation, technologists feel they've created something concrete," she writes in *Cyberselfish*, "so that no atonement (if that's what philanthropy is) need be made, no guilt money paid … Their view is, 'I've got mine, so why can't you get yours.'"

Borsook's targets typically counter that as "out-of-the-box thinkers," they are awaiting philanthropic opportunities that will maximize the efficacy of their contributions. The vogue among the New Rich is to dismiss the nonprofit sector as bloated and arcane, a black hole where contributions are frittered away on inefficient administration and expensive frills. The solution, the theory goes, is an innovative brand of giving termed "venture philanthropy." Nonprofits, the dot-commers surmise, can be run more effectively if their growth strategies are patterned after those of, say, online vendors of dog-grooming products. "When you create wealth in a short time, you think about philanthropy as you think about business," eBay founder Pierre Omidyar told *Forbes* last May. "You don't move from saying, 'How can we rationalize an industry?' to 'Where do I sign the check?'"

The concept of venture philanthropy was popularized in a 1997 *Harvard Business Review* article entitled "Virtuous Capital: What Foundations Can Learn From Venture Capital." Authors Christine Letts, William Dyer, and Allen Grossman urged potential donors to model their charitable involvement on the business dealings of venture capitalists—philanthropists, for example, were instructed to stipulate specific performance goals and to monitor their "investments" as carefully as stock portfolios.

The quest for accountability may sound reasonable enough to the uninitiated, but nonprofit veterans question the concept's usefulness. Unfamiliar with the challenges of assisting the underprivileged, techno-elitists are prone to meddling in the affairs of even well-run charitable groups. Many earmark their donations for specific programs without taking into account the day-to-day expenses that enable charities to function in the first place. In the Bay Area, for example, 71 percent of donors stipulate that their money pay for specific projects of their choosing. Hamstrung by those restrictions, many of the recipient charities are scrambling to meet such non-sexy costs as office rent and staff salaries.

Dot-commers err in assuming that instant NASDAQ success qualifies them as nonprofit geniuses. Though certainly justified in being picky about how their money is spent—no one wants to fund a crooked nonprofit tsar's Jaguar repairs and Maui trysts—the New Rich interfere far too much. "Part of the model as it's presented is that the venture philanthropists do get very involved with the organization so they can bring in their expertise, which is great," says Bruce Sievers, executive director of the Walter and Elise Haas Fund in San Francisco. "But with that expertise comes an amount of control … To have a funder come in and reshape that organization, potentially in their image, simply because they are supplying the funds, is very problematic."

As a result, instead of focusing on their street-level missions, recipients of dot-com largesse must concern themselves with proving they have a viable "business plan," or that donors can expect a healthy "ROI"(Return on Investment). "'Our portfolio of grantees,' I hear [that] phrase all the time," says Claire Peeps, executive director of the Durfee Foundation. "There is a real show-me-the-goods mentality that I think is coming from the younger members in the boardroom. The nonprofits' concerns are that there's too much program support, not enough infrastructure support, and that the increased evaluations are killing them."

"The dot-com-millionaires-turned-venture philanthropists underestimate the difficulty of philanthropy," agrees Lisa Sullivan, founder and president of Listen,

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Inc., which trains urban youth for leadership. "I think they're going to find out that giving away money is hard, that social change doesn't happen at Internet speed."

The new philanthropists occasionally extend the charity-as-business model to farcical extremes. Database vendor Informix donated an entire software suite to OMB Watch, for which the public-spending guardian was deeply grateful. A year later, however, Informix demanded that OMB Watch pay a $250,000 licensing fee to continue using the programs—or else. "We became totally dependent on this piece of software, and now they are threatening to cut us off or force us to pay for their software," grumbles Gary Bass, OMB Watch's executive director. "I was already nervous about any dot-com philanthropy, and here they [gave] a gift in such a way as to ultimately become a controlling interest and help their own business. I think it's a bastardization of philanthropy." Informix, however, has been nice enough to offer OMB Watch a special reduced rate—a mere $233,000, roughly a 7-percent discount.

Saving Whales With One Fin

By regarding philanthropy as akin to venture capitalism, in which a foolish choice can lead to relative penury, dot-commers are bound to favor safe bets over potential boat-rockers. Cutting-edge charities had hoped

Who's Who

Does Secretary of Defense **Bill Cohen** have a yen to join his TV star wife in show business? Recently he hobnobbed with such Hollywood luminaries as **Morgan Freeman**, **Glenn Close**, **Sydney Pollack**, **Donald Sutherland**, and **Sam Waterston** at a party given by the American Film Institute's **George Stevens**. A few days earlier, Cohen hosted a party of his own to honor the Motion Picture Association president **Jack Valenti**. And what a swell party it was! There were 350 guests, and the check came to $218 per person. Ninety-four military musicians were flown to Beverly Hills for the event, at a cost of $165,000. The total bill for the taxpayer: $295,000.

Our sources suspect that Cohen has more than good fellowship in mind. Valenti, who is in his late 70s, is expected to retire soon. Cohen is said to be interested in the job, which not only offers one of the largest salaries in Washington but a private movie theater and free access to all the latest flicks.

Did you know that "Madame Butterfly," aka **Theresa LePore**, the designer of the Palm Beach ballot that confused elderly Jewish Democrats into voting for **Pat Buchanan**, was once a flight attendant on a private plane owned by **Adnan Khashoggi**? Khashoggi, you will recall, was the Saudi millionaire who served as a middleman in the **Reagan** Administration's arms sales to Iran. Our contributing editor and *Slate*'s "Chatterbox" columnist, **Timothy Noah**, posits that Khashoggi is linked not only to the Iran Contra and Palm Beach scandals, but to **Imelda Marcos**, Wedtech, BCCI, **Donald Trump**, and the death of **Princess Di**. Noah, in his delicious tongue-in-cheek posting on December 4, even succeeds in connecting the Saudi millionaire to **Katharine Hepburn**'s endorsement of **Harris Wofford**'s candidacy for the U.S. Senate a decade ago. At least in that case, Khashoggi was on the right side.

Wilmer, Cutler & Pickering is typical of Washington's top law firms. The average partner made $530,000 last year. To cover all bases, it has Democrats like **Lloyd Cutler** and Republicans like **C. Boyden Gray**. And it is dedicated to Washington's most hallowed ritual: You scratch my back and I'll scratch yours. An example was unearthed by *The Washington Post*'s **Lloyd Grove**, who discovered that the firm had sent out the following letter: "In the spirit of the upcoming holiday season, we are asking some of our area restaurants and shops we frequent to consider donating a gift/prize to give during our holiday party."

Richard Mellon Scaife's dedication to objective reporting, perhaps most clearly demonstrated in his financing of the *American Spectator*'s relentless search for skeletons in **Bill Clinton**'s closet, was again on display during the fall political campaign. The Sunday before the election, according to *The Washington Post*'s **Howard Kurtz**, he ordered the paper he owns, the *Pittsburgh Tribune-Review*, to pull all pictures of **Al Gore**.

Speaking of conservatives, the *Weekly Standard*'s **William Kristol** overcame his right-wing prejudices to predict that Al Gore would win the popular vote. Other conservatives were not so successful. **Ben Stein** and **Tony Snow** each pre-

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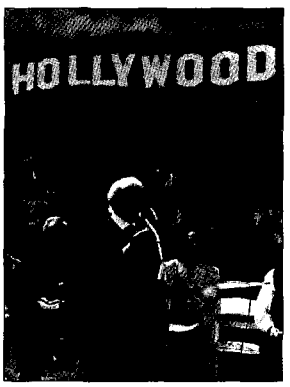
that youthful gadzillionaires would be jazzed to take bold risks, tackling issues deemed risqué in the hallways of old-school foundations. "But a lot of New Economy wealth is going to pretty traditional causes and pretty traditional groups," says Neil Carlson, a researcher at the National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy. "New Economy philanthropists have yet to figure out a way of investing in areas and issues that really get to what I see as some of the most glaring problems in our country today—the wealth gap, the sort of growing divide between inner city communities and suburban communities, the lack of access to affordable health care—the sort of meat-and-potatoes issues that have to do with social and economic justice."

Indeed, the purportedly forward-thinking techno-elite seem to prefer the favorite charitable outlets of generations past—museums, Ivy League schools, ballet troupes, and causes that Boston anti-gang activist Rev. Eugene F. Rivers III has famously lampooned as "saving whales with one fin." Of last year's eight biggest charitable contributions, for example, six went to large, wealthy universities such as Stanford and Cornell. Cisco Systems co-founder Sandy Lerner has focused on pets-for-prisoners programs and restoring Jane Austen's English vicarage (where she hopes aspiring writers can someday spend inspiringly retro nights, sleeping beneath antique

dicted **Bush** would win by five percent. The ladies were even more bullish about Bush, with **Mary Matalin** predicting he would win by eight percent and **Peggy Noonan** by nine.

Joe Lockhart, the former Clinton White House press secretary, has been hired by the software giant Oracle. **Larry Ellison**, Oracle's CEO, says "he will help us clearly and broadly communicate the benefits of e-business and e-government." In Ellison's case, this involves getting him on the cover of magazines. According to a *Monthly* writer who wanted to talk to him about a story, Ellison will not do an interview unless he gets the cover. It seems possible that Lockhart will be the first former White House press secretary to go to work for someone with a bigger ego than his previous boss's.



Speaking of new jobs, former diplomat **J. Stapleton Roy** has become managing director of Kissinger Associates, a consulting firm led by the former secretary of state. Roy resigned from the State Department to protest the disciplining of six members of his bureau of intelligence and research staff over the loss of a laptop computer containing top-secret information. **Kissinger** didn't take such an indulgent view of security lapses during his service in the Nixon administration, where his constant bellyaching about leaks was one of the main reasons the White House Plumbers were formed.

James Rogan, the California Republican Congressman who was one of the leaders of the movement to impeach Bill Clinton and who was defeated in the November election, was recently observed by one of **Al Kamen**'s sources lunching at McCormick & Schmick's restaurant with **Edward Newberry**, a partner at Patton Boggs, the firm of legendary Democratic lobbyist **Tommy Boggs**. "It's always terrific to get a good lawyer," says Newberry. And it's also good for a Democratic firm to have a well-connected Republican.

Two anecdotes from November 7 that may shed light on the objectivity of two important institutions, Fox News and the Supreme Court (curious, isn't it, how the two go together in one's mind?):

During the afternoon and evening of election day and during the early morning of the following day, **John Ellis**, the Fox News desk chief who prematurely proclaimed Bush the winner in Florida, conferred on the phone with his cousin **Jeb Bush** once and with another cousin, **George W. Bush**, four times.

At an election night party, Justice **Sandra Day O'Connor**'s husband, **John**, according to *The Wall Street Journal*, "mentioned her desire to step down according to three witnesses. But Mr. O'Connor said his wife would be reluctant to retire if a Democrat were in the White House."

If you want to know who **W.**'s closest personal friends are, *The Washington Post*'s **Roxanne Roberts** says they include **Joe** and **Jan O'Neill**, who introduced him to **Laura**; **Jack Morrison**, who dates back to Bush's Andover days; and "Midland pals **Don Evans**, [the new secretary of commerce,] and **Charlie Younger**, an orthopedic surgeon." Will Fox News hire them all as commentators?

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quilts and peeing in chamber pots). Infoseek founder Steve Kirsch, one of Silicon Valley's most loquacious philanthropists, has funded such idiosyncratic causes as NASA's search for Earth-destroying asteroids and a California law that permits zero-emission vehicles to drive in carpool lanes (Kirsch, naturally, drives an electric car).

Donors also tend to contribute locally—fabulous news for churches in already well-off Sunnyvale, but hardly an efficient way for dot-com dollars to tackle social problems in the vast regions yet to reap rewards from the advent of one-click shopping. "The New Economy left a whole bunch of people behind," says Sullivan, who has found traditional foundations like Rockefeller, Ford, and Kellogg more eager than dot-commers to fund her trail-blazing work in Washington, D.C.'s blighted neighborhoods. "I'd really like to see the folks who benefited from this growth inequity turn some of their attention to addressing the folks who were left behind. That would be, in my book, disproportionately people of color."

Virtual Charity

One gap the techies have aggressively addressed is the much heralded "digital divide." A large number of dot-commers have concentrated on furnishing inner cities and rural communities with PCs and modems. Chief among these crusaders has been John Gage of Sun Microsystems, who founded an initiative called Netday that aims to bring the Internet to classrooms in underprivileged areas. "In the beginning days, what the schools needed was the hands-on volunteers to actually get the wires through the walls," says Julie Evans, Netday's current CEO. "What they really need now is knowledge, to sift through all the information that's in the world today. It provides a schema to help those decision makers, the school-side administrators, really learn how to use the best resources on the Web."

But critics charge that technological bridges over the digital divide are doomed to be little more than decorations. Evans dreamily boasts that the Web has enabled grade-schoolers in Rosedale, Mississippi to take virtual field trips, to understand that "there aren't cotton fields in New York City." But how does that understanding contribute to an eight-year-old's ability to escape the cycle of poverty? "The digital divide doesn't exist in a vacuum," says Carlson. "It exists as the result of years of social and economic discrimination. It exists as a result of what I see as an abandonment of a poor underclass. So to sort of expect that you need to throw technology at a problem without addressing these other issues as well is fairly naïve."

The computers-in-classrooms solution is particularly out of touch when it comes to the Third World, a fact recently acknowledged by none other than Bill Gates. Though he admits to once believing that information technology was an elixir for the destitute, Gates now terms that outlook "naïve—very naïve." The $21 billion Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation may be roundly criticized for its Byzantine bureaucracy, but at least its namesake recognizes the tunnel vision of his sheltered peers. At a November conference in Seattle designed "to bring the benefits of connectivity and participation in the e-economy to all of the world's six billion people," Gates stunned the crowd by questioning the life-altering power of computers. Speaking of a hypothetical village in sub-Saharan Africa, he lampooned his peers' focus on PCs as panacea: "Mothers are going to walk right up to that computer and say, 'My children are dying, what can you do?' They're not going to sit there and, like, browse eBay or something. What they want is for their children to live. They don't want their children's growth to be stunted. Do you really have to put in computers to figure that out?" Netday founder Gage brusquely dismissed Gates' skepticism. "After listening to three days of serious analysis and work, and then to have Gates rather flippantly say, 'You've got to have clean water and food... That wasn't exactly furthering the point of the entire meeting," Gage said.

Myopia may be the key factor in the dot-commers' overweening faith in technological solutions, but the role of old-fashioned self-interest can't be underestimated either. Computer-savvy children are tomorrow's eBay bidders and Lotus Notes users, after all, and a cynic could easily regard digital-divide initiatives as thinly veiled attempts to enlarge the pool of potential e-commerce customers or low-level tech drones. Thus in New York's Silicon Alley, mere miles from slums galore, the biggest recipients of the industry's generosity have been MOUSE and HEAVEN, organizations dedicated to helping youngsters develop technical acumen. And flush with cash from his days launching software maker Red Hat, Marc Ewing has plunged into philanthropy by founding something called the Red Hat Center for Open Source, dedicated to using the open-source development model "for the greater good of the general public"—as if a geek-chic programming philosophy holds the key to undoing human woe. So far, the Center's only accomplishment of note has been to partially fund ibiblio.org, a yet-to-be-launched online library.

A particularly egregious example of self-serving philanthropy occurred last February when 3Com, Lucent, and Cisco joined together to pledge $100 million worth of products and services to government agencies and schools. In addition to currying favor with legislators, the

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tech troika will be introducing millions of impressionable youngsters to their trusty brand names, an advertising coup that has soft drink companies and fast-food chains green with envy. "Being a good corporate citizen pays great dividends," said Cisco's director of global government alliances in announcing the pact.

I Feel Good!

The *Cyberselfish* mentality is also apparent in other philanthropic avenues. As masters of spin, high-tech firms recognize the public-relations value of good works—or, more importantly, the *appearance* of good works. It is no coincidence that Gates' fantastic donations to Third World vaccination programs began making page A1 during the height of Microsoft's antitrust tussle. Sharka Stuyt, a veteran marketing director for Canadian firms Pivotal Corp. and ATI Technologies, believes that companies must use philanthropy to accrue "reputational capital." "A socially active company is perceived to be more trustworthy than one that is not," says Stuyt, who is organizing a nonprofit called Friends of Technology Group, aimed at fostering high-tech philanthropy. "The courts would likely have been more understanding, responsive, and accommodating" to Microsoft, she notes, had Gates taken the time in the mid-'90s to pose for a few more photo-ops with leukemia patients.

The inability of dot-commers to separate their philanthropy from their work-day duties is so endemic that every saintly act seems to have an ulterior motive related to market share and product branding. New Economy gurus have a nifty buzz phrase for the phenomenon of using philanthropy to lure customers—"cause marketing." Workplace charity drives are "corporate-giving solutions," and volunteer programs are designed to "maintain competitive advantage and loyalty." Online retailer eToys does not support Rosie's Readers for the sake of improving literacy, but rather, according to a marketing report from Boston-based consultancy Cone Inc., "because the Internet company is leveraging its resources to develop a comprehensive cause program to significantly impact their brand while making a difference within the community."

The desire to create synergy between philanthropy and the bottom line is indicative of the softness of the dot-com set's commitment to charity. Their philanthropic cluelessness is evinced by the apparatus that has arisen to manage their donations. There are philanthropic consultants, who are retained to cajole their guilt-ridden wealthy clients into writing checks. There are philanthropic mutual funds, like Schwab's Fund for Charitable Giving, that are designed to make charity as palatable as playing the market. And there are social organizations that lure the New Rich into philanthropy with the sirens' call of free booze. "We have parties that are cocktails, hors d'oeuvres," says Abigail Ochs, founder of one such group called InvolveX. "There will be four different nonprofits in the room, and [guests] will go around and see which nonprofit interests them." One suspects her brilliant party guests wouldn't spend five minutes seeking out the needy sans apple martinis and seared foie gras.

Giving is viewed not as a moral imperative but as a spiritual side dish—a feel-good activity on par with mid-day facials and popping Paxil.

The prodding is necessary because the dot-com set has no grand designs on a selfless second act. Cloistered from the non-networked world, their energy channeled into 100-hour-a-week quests for instant wealth, they have little natural impetus to tackle the planet's myriad social ills. The current vogue for giving, spurred by a mix of shame and competitive desire, seems like a fad. "Generosity is becoming quasi-fashionable in Silicon Valley, like monster houses and BMW Z3s," an article in *Upside Today* announced last April. Though the reporter's intention was to hail the onset of dot-com philanthropy, the glib phrasing elegantly captures the industry's detached view of giving back.

Giving is viewed not as a moral imperative, but as a spiritual side dish—a feel-good activity on par with mid-day facials or popping Paxil. Lecturer Tom Mahon, for example, has made charitable contributions a pillar of his "Reconnecting" program, a self-improvement regimen aimed at increasing mental well-being among dot-commers. Helping the poor souls unblessed with Java-coding skills is the cherry atop the sundae that is the techno-elite lifestyle. Philanthropy cheerleader Steve Kirsch neatly, albeit unintentionally, summarizes the mindset: "Once you've got the house, the car, maybe the private jet, what else are you going to do?" ●

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MEMORANDUM

To: Members of the Press
From: Marc Thiessen, Press Spokesman
Date: December 7, 2000
Subject: URGENT: SENATOR HELMS' HEALTH

To our friends in the media –

In answer to your manifold inquiries:

Senator Helms is not sick. He is not in the hospital. He is not on life support. He does not have terminal prostate cancer. He does not have pancreatic cancer. He is absolutely fine and will (God willing) be around to torment you for a long time to come.

Relax and accept it.

– Marc

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Locking Up The Vote

Disenfranchisement of former prisoners was the real crime in Florida

BY NICHOLAS THOMPSON

ROSETTA MEEKS LIVES IN FLORIDA'S Miami-Dade County, but she didn't get to vote in the presidential election. Nobody scrutinized her ballot for hanging chads or screamed himself hoarse trying to prevent officials from counting it. An African-American woman who has devoted her last six years to teaching computer skills to low-income people, Meeks wanted to vote and knew whom she wanted to vote for. But she was locked out of the mayhem.

Rosetta Meeks was convicted of a drug felony seven and a half years ago and, under Florida law, every felon is permanently barred from the voting booth unless the governor and at least three of his cabinet members decide to restore her civil rights. Thirteen other states have similar laws: If you commit any felony—be it murder or lying on a customs form—you never again get to have a say in the election of the president or the town selectman. According to the best available estimates, this law kept 525,000 people in Florida, most of them poor and a great many of them black, away from the polls in a presidential election decided by just a few hundred votes.

Like most ex-felons, Meeks didn't meet all 23 of the qualifications for Florida's process of fast-track enfranchisement. The qualifications range from the type of crime you committed (you can't, for example, have been found guilty of battery of a public transit official) to your financial status (you can't owe the state more than $1,000, not uncommon for poor ex-felons who are often subjected to large fines and restitution payments, or required by judges to pay the fees of their state-appointed attorneys.)

So, to start her application for clemency, Meeks had to fill out a convoluted 16-page form with questions ranging from the invasive, like the date of birth of any person with whom she had a child out of wedlock, to the irrelevant, like the cause of death of her parents, to the potentially invidious, like the name and purpose of any organization she belongs to. Then on page 14 it asks "Have you ever been a defendant in civil litigation? Y/N____. If Yes, please describe in details." Directly below, it repeats the exact same question without the "please."

The state clemency board uses the form to conduct an investigation into the applicant's past. It then makes a recommendation on whether clemency should be granted and forwards the investigative report, which the applicant is never allowed to see, to Governor Jeb Bush. The governor, according to Florida law, has "unfettered discretion to deny clemency at any time for any reason."

According to Meeks, "They wanted to know my mother and father's names. They wanted to know what my parents died of. Does that really matter?" Apparently it does because the Florida Parole Commission recommended against her. "I made a mistake. I'm sorry. I abused the system by using drugs. When you are young, you do things that you shouldn't do. Do I have to pay for this for the rest of my life?" Meeks asks before adding: "I'm very proud of myself now. If I don't get the right to vote this time, I'm going to continue to try."

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Meeks was persistent, and her story has a happy ending. She paid off her fines, and a local civil-rights organization lent her a car so she was able to drive nine hours north to appeal directly to the governor. Finally, the day after Al Gore conceded the election and more than two and a half years after she began her quest, Jeb Bush waved his hand and magically returned Meeks her right to vote.

But most other ex-felons are shut out. The Sunshine State restored civil rights to only 1,832 ex-felons last year, about 1 out of every 300 in the state. Florida officials say that they do not have this data broken down by race or class, but, pre-election at least, it didn't seem to hurt to be a white Republican. Chuck Colson, who had proposed that the Nixon administration firebomb the Brookings Institution and went to prison for his role in the Watergate scandal, was pardoned by Bush and, unlike Meeks, allowed to vote in November. A supporter of the governor's brother, Colson now runs a ministry to bring Christianity to inmates. "He's a great American," said Gov. Bush.

Extended Sentence

The United States is virtually the only industrialized country that denies former prisoners the vote, though the rules vary by state. In Maine and Vermont, convicts can vote even when behind bars. In 34 states, felons are not allowed to vote until they leave parole. Maryland and Arizona permanently disqualify two-time felons; Washington bans felons convicted before 1984, and Tennessee bans felons convicted before 1986. And in 10 states, if you commit a single felony you are essentially walled off on Election Day until you die.

The result is that about one million Americans who have completed their sentences are disenfranchised. Nationally, one out of seven adult black men will never again get to vote. In Alabama, which permanently denies felons the right to vote, about one out of every three adult black men is barred for life. In an extensive study of two poor and mostly black communities in Tallahassee, Florida, criminal justice professor Todd Clear was unable to find a single family without at least one disenfranchised man—making it unlikely that the community will be able to band together when, for example, a state senator proposes locating a toxic waste dump nearby.

Felons, of course, aren't just murderers and muggers. Three out of every five felony convictions don't lead to jail time, and there's no clear line you have to cross to earn one. Being convicted for driving while intoxicated three times bans you from voting for life in numerous states. Stopping payment on a check of more than $150 with intent to defraud makes you a felon in Florida. Being caught with one-fifth of an ounce of crack earns you a federal felony, but being caught with one-fifth of an ounce of cocaine only earns a misdemeanor.

Having a good lawyer can get you off the hook or at least knock the charges down to a misdemeanor. But most poor people get stuck with overworked public defenders who don't make the grade. Last year, for example, the four public attorneys in Hernando County, Florida had to handle 1,568 felony cases. That's slightly better than the even more appalling numbers from years past, but Governor Bush has proposed a funding cut that threatens the promising trend, according to Florida Public Defender Association President Howard Babb, Jr..

Ball and Chain

Felon disenfranchisement doesn't fit any of the standard justifications for criminal punishment. It doesn't rehabilitate, no one has ever argued or found evidence that it deters crime, and it's an odd form of retribution. Unlike, say, taking someone's license away when he's caught driving drunk, there's no clear link between the punishment and the crime.

Advocates usually argue from moral grounds, beginning that voting is actually a privilege not a right. Next, they argue that people who have broken the laws shouldn't be involved in making them, and that ex-felons will vote in ways that harm society and influence criminal justice policy for the worse. But only the most rehabilitated felons are likely to choose to exercise their right and there is no evidence that they choose harmful policies, even in states that allow convicts to vote while in prison.

There's also a case that restoring voting rights helps ex-felons in at least a small way to restore dignity and sense of community. According to ex-felon Heywood Fennell, such denial is "a way of preparing the guillotine of despair and hopelessness for people coming out of prison into community. If you don't vote, you don't have any say on when the trash man is going to pick up the garbage. A vote is power, a way to be involved in the process and it helps give you the opportunity to rebuild your life."

To put it another way, denying the right to vote is just one more slap in the face to the 95 percent of prisoners who complete their sentences and eventually return to their communities. Despite our nation's skyrocketing prison population, investment in rehabilitation has dropped. Numerous prisoners now finish their sentences without parole and are released with

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just a bus ticket home and about $150—no skills and no assistance finding employment. Giving them the right to vote alone won't save them from returning to crime, but it's free and it can't hurt. According to Alex Friedmann, recently released from jail in Tennessee: "If society doesn't care enough about former prisoners to treat them as citizens, with the voting rights of citizens, then why should former prisoners care enough about society to act like law-abiding citizens?"

Reconstruction Never Ended

As with so much of this country's past, a large part of the history of felon disenfranchisement hangs on the issue of race. It's no coincidence that blacks are harmed the most by felon disenfranchisement; many of the laws seem to have been drawn up for that purpose.

Many states disenfranchised criminals even before the Civil War. But in the South, after the Civil War and Reconstruction, legal codes were crafted to countermand the 14th and 15th amendments, which gave blacks equal protection under the law and gave black men the right to vote. In Mississippi, the convention of 1890 replaced laws disenfranchising all convicts with laws disenfranchising only people convicted of the crimes blacks were supposedly more likely to commit. For almost a century thereafter you couldn't lose your right to vote in Mississippi if you committed murder or rape, but you could if you married someone of another race.

In Virginia, U.S. Senator Carter Glass worked to expand the disenfranchisement laws along with poll taxes and literacy tests. He described the state's 1901 convention as follows: "Discrimination! Why that is precisely what we propose. That, exactly, is what this Convention was elected for—to discriminate to the very extremity of permissible action under the limits of the Federal Constitution, with a view to the elimination of every Negro voter who can be gotten rid of legally, without materially impairing the numerical strength of the white electorate."

In Alabama, the criminal code in the constitution of 1901 was, according to the chair of the convention, designed to "ensure white supremacy," and crimes worthy of disenfranchisement were classified depending in large part by whether delegates thought blacks were likely to commit them. The state though was additionally focused on excluding poor whites. Delegates "wished to disfranchise most of the Negroes and the uneducated and propertyless whites in order to legally create a conservative electorate," wrote historian Malcolm McMillan.

In Florida, the constitution drafted in 1868 disenfranchised ex-felons as well as anyone convicted of larceny, a crime that courts were given special jurisdiction over in 1865 because of "the great increase in minor offenses, which may be reasonably anticipated from the emancipation of former slaves." The 1868 constitution only passed when conservatives took over the convention and annulled a constitution passed by blacks and radical Republicans which did not include a disenfranchisement clause.

In Alabama, one out of every three black men is barred from voting for life.

The provisions that came out of those conventions, from poll taxes to grandfather clauses to literacy tests were almost all struck down by the Warren Court and the Civil Rights Act of 1965. The only one still standing is the felony provision—which isn't surprising since, as historian Morgan Kousser testified before the Supreme Court in 1985, the disenfranchisement laws provided Southern states with "insurance if courts struck down the more blatantly unconstitutional clauses." Of course, the literacy test resembles Rosetta Meeks' 16-page form, and the poll tax isn't a great deal different from Florida's requirement that felons pay off money owed to the state—potentially including the cost of a public defender provided them because of their poverty.

Of course, not all felon disenfranchisement laws originate in clearly racist movements, but the impact always falls disproportionately on blacks. Even in Iowa and Wyoming, for example, one in four black men is permanently disenfranchised. Blacks do commit a disproportionate share of the crime in this country. But they also suffer disproportionately from incompetent public defenders and discriminatory sentencing practices, such as the disparate penalties given to crack and cocaine possessors. Cocaine is the drug of choice in corporate bathrooms and blacks and whites are convicted of possession at about the same rate. Crack is the drug of choice in inner cities and blacks are

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about 25 times more likely to be arrested for possession, and thus to receive felony convictions and be barred from voting—a legal oddity which would undoubtedly have delighted Carter Glass.

Votes They Really Don't Want to Count

Regardless of intent, the disenfranchisement of felons seems to be successfully keeping politicians disliked by a majority of blacks in office. According to Jeff Manza and Christopher Uggen, sociologists who have done the most thorough studies available of ex-felon voting patterns based on class, income, geography, race, and scores of other factors, giving ex-felons the right to vote would have swung several races away from conservative Republicans over the past two decades. Conservative Senator John Warner (R-Va.) would never have entered office; Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.) wouldn't have been elected in 1988; Connie Mack (R-Fla.) would have been defeated in 1988. Phil Gramm (R-Tex.) and Craig Thomas (R-Wyo.) might also never have been elected since their Republican predecessors would have lost. These five Senators received an average grade of 25 percent out of 100 on the NAACP's most recent voting scorecard.

"A perpetual loss of the right to vote serves no practical or philosophical purpose." —James Q. Wilson

Manza and Uggen also estimate that Al Gore would have defeated George W. Bush by between 10,000 and 85,000 votes in Florida—unsurprising since Bush only earned six percent of the black vote in that state. The ironic result is that a man who ran partly on the theme of redemption, and turned his life around at age 40, may well be president because civil redemption wasn't offered to more than 500,000 ex-felons in the state his brother governs.

Not surprisingly, in a number of states, legislators are working to restore voting rights to ex-felons. But potential supporters always run into the same political problems: By definition, the people who stand to benefit the most can't vote, and no politician wants to be called soft on crime. Also, the advantage for Democrats of enfranchisement has pushed the issue into the coarse partisan realm.

The only way that state legislatures have been able to progress has been through bipartisan deals. In Alabama for example, Republicans and Democrats drafted a compromise bill that combined felon enfranchisement with a voter ID bill which Republicans supported. The bill sailed through the Alabama House of Representatives and was only derailed in the Senate when one powerful supporter tried to pile on a five-year death penalty moratorium. Another possibility for coalition building could occur by linking the restoration of voting rights to the restoration of the right to own guns. Just as the punishment doesn't fit the crime to deny the right to vote to felons who haven't been convicted of election fraud, it doesn't fit to deny the right to own a gun to felons, such as devious accountants, who have not committed violent crimes.

Closed Chambers

The easiest way to change the law would be for Congress to wipe the slate clean and standardize state rules. This would be particularly useful because the confusion over who can and cannot vote is a deterrent itself. At the Louisiana prison where he is incarcerated, Norris Henderson has started a civic engagement program because most ex-felons just don't know that they actually can vote in that state. "They don't even know that they can be part of the decision making that is governing their lives," he says. A woman currently bringing suit against Florida, on disability for blindness caused by diabetes and hepatitis, voted regularly in Florida for 25 years before being informed that she was disqualified because of a felony committed when she was 19. Worst of all, in Florida this year, Secretary of State Katherine Harris contracted out the job of scrubbing Florida's voting lists of all previously convicted felons to a Texas company called ChoicePoint. It apparently did a little too good a job and scrubbed out 8,000 people convicted of misdemeanors, blocking legitimate voters during the presidential election.

Unfortunately, however, the one effort to pass a federal initiative, proposed by John Conyers (D-Mich.) has both lacked bipartisan support and been scuttled by constitutional issues. At the convention in 1787, surprisingly little attention was given to the question of who determines the right to vote. The Articles of Confederation had left complete control of franchise to the states and the Constitutional Convention only considered the issue late in the drafting process, in a committee that met while George Washington went fish-

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ing. The result was a confusing mandate that gives states the authority to determine who votes while giving Congress the authority to make law regarding the "Times, Places, and Manner" of elections. Subsequently, issues such as the right of women to vote have only been resolved with constitutional amendments. That same result seems likely today, particularly as the Rehnquist Court devolves more and more power to states and whittles down the authority granted the federal government.

But it is possible that constitutional justification for Conyers' bill could be found in the 14th and 15th Amendments which give Congress the power to enforce the equal protection and suffrage provisions by "appropriate legislation." Recent case law has given Congress the power to use this justification to supersede state law only when it can prove that there was racist intent in the original drafting of the laws in question. A disparate racial impact is not sufficient—which is why the Supreme Court recently ruled that the disparate sentences given to crack and cocaine offenders are constitutional.

Felon disenfranchisement laws, however, were clearly structured with racist motives in the post-Reconstruction conventions of Virginia, Mississippi, Florida, and Alabama. Congress and then the courts will have to determine however whether racist intent in some states is enough to justify a law superseding state laws nationally. Again the odds are limited by the Rehnquist Court which has not been particularly friendly to issues of civil rights.

Democracy in America

Since the nation's founding, we've moved forward, enfranchising more and more groups: from people who didn't own property and immigrants in the mid-19th century, to blacks after the Civil War, to women in 1920, to 18-year olds and blacks in a real sense again in the 1960s. In the past three decades, 15 states have restored voting rights to felons. But none of that progress has come without blood and years of work.

The arguments against enfranchisement are always the same: Voting is a privilege; the people who can't vote aren't competent or independent enough to make fair voting decisions; chaos will result if everyone gets to vote. But those arguments rest on very thin ice which eventually breaks. Alexis de Tocqueville wrote in 1835: "The further the limit of voting rights is extended, the stronger is the need felt to spread them still wider; for after each new concession the forces of democracy are strengthened ... Finally, the exception becomes the rule; concessions follow one another without interruption and there is no halting place until universal suffrage has been attained."

There have obviously been bumps on the road since de Tocqueville. But felons are now the only people over the age of 18 still denied the right to vote, with the exception of the insane. As prominent neoconservative social theorist James Q. Wilson says, "A perpetual loss of the right to vote serves no practical or philosophical purpose."

Denying felons the right to vote after they have served their sentences and done their time runs against both the idea that people can redeem themselves and one of the nation's most important principles, the right to choose who governs you. The laws are anachronistic remnants of the hideous post-Civil War Reconstruction. As Faulkner described the protagonist of *Absalom! Absalom!* living in Mississippi after the Civil War: "He was a barracks filled with stubborn back-looking ghosts still recovering ... from the fever which had cured the disease."

There are politicians today who know that their power depends on keeping these back-looking ghosts alive. And that turns what it should mean to be American upside down. ●

Research assistance provided by Joe Dempsey and Corine Hegland.

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Tidbits & Outrages

Going in Style

The Washington Court Hotel, near Union Station, was rated as having among the best public restrooms in the nation's capital, just beating the Kennedy Center and the Washington National Cathedral.

At least he wasn't sent to the pound.

A Colorado man, who got into a fistfight after barking like a dog at his neighbor, was sentenced to five years of probation.

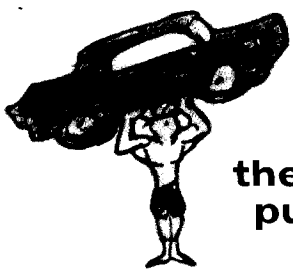
They've also been advising Bush on global warming

The Unitarius Academy of Science recently predicted that a fleet of spaceships from the planet Myton will visit Earth next year to get us to join the Interplanetary Confederation of Planets.

By Christina Larson

When the Socratic method breaks down

A Los Angeles law firm sent out 600 packages containing fake hand grenades to would-be clients with the message "business is war."



Sign up for the premium plan and they'll do your pushups for you

The L.A. Fitness Sports Club in La Habra offers valet parking.

So much for papal infallibility

A recent teaser for a washingtonpost.com article read: "Pope, accused of stealing classified data, gets 20 years."

Contributions provided by Doug Hecox

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Flunking Science

Congress shot itself in the foot when it killed the OTA. Will Republicans bring it back to life?

By Julie Wakefield

Today no one denies that technology plays a central role in the economy, foreign policy, and our daily lives. There's genetically engineered food on our plates, cell phones attached to teenage ears, smart bombs searching for targets, and e-everything everywhere. That trend is reflected in action on Capitol Hill, where most bills contain at least inklings of science, medicine, or technology. Somehow, we have faith that our elected officials are up to the task of mastering all those issues and making informed decisions.

That might be an easy job for a polymath like retiring Sen. Patrick Moynihan (D-N.Y.), but what about Rep. Steve Largent (R-Okla.), a former wide receiver for the Seattle Seahawks? How does former aerobics instructor Rep. Mary Bono (R-Calif.)—wife of the late Sonny—get up to speed on the latest ripples in nanotechnology before voting on the defense appropriations bill?

Most likely, they turn to interest-group lobbyists for a crash course on whatever issue is at hand. Or they read a few *Newsweek* articles collated by their staff and hope that the leadership looking for their votes understands the issues better than they do.

Few members of Congress have the educational background for understanding many of the complex issues now coming before them. In the wake of the November election, the number of members with science and technology training stands at an all-time high of 24, but that only constitutes five percent of the Congress. Not surprisingly, when it comes to issues of science and technology, Congress' educational deficit is frequently glaring.

Before a recent budget hearing on the National Science Foundation, for instance, Rep. Vernon Ehlers happened to bump into a Republican colleague. He informed Ehlers of his intent to whack the appropriation, grumbling, "NSF has no business funding automatic teller machines and gambling." Fortunately, Ehlers, whose doctorate in physics comes from University of California at Berkeley, quickly set him straight, explaining "ATMs and gaming theory" actually referred to Asynchronous Transfer Mode, a coding scheme in communications, and to mathematical approaches to probabilistic analysis. Those two hot research areas were more in tune with NSF's mission, but without intervention from Ehlers, his colleague would have put them out.

Of course, the nature of democracy ensures that there will always be morons in Congress. But for those thoughtful legislators who recognize the gaps in their knowledge yet want to make educated decisions for the country, there's not much help out there. No single agency is charged with cultivating the minds of Congress on complicated issues that rise above the average highway-funding bill.

It hasn't always been like that. For more than 20 years, lawmakers seeking impartial analyses on emerging trends could turn to the Office of Technology Assessment (OTA), an agency once dubbed the "national defense against the dumb." In its heyday, the 143-member congressionally chartered agency published, on average, 50 in-depth reports a year on subjects from biotechnology to global energy, and it was widely praised for its insightfulness and ability to explain all sides of a debate without picking one.

But in 1995, OTA became a casualty of the Republican "Contract with America," as House Speaker Newt Gingrich (R-Ga.) and his minions sought to kill off an entire agency to demonstrate that they were serious

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about shrinking the government. Gingrich, the self-described futurist, apparently didn't see much past the midterm election when he led Congress to disband its own technology think tank just as the country was experiencing an unprecedented high-tech boom. But the revolutionaries' failure to distinguish between smart government agencies and superfluous ones has hurt Congress. OTA filled a critical need, and no viable alternative has arisen to adequately plug the knowledge gap left in its absence.

Since OTA's demise, Congress has grappled with issues ranging from the Internet explosion to biologically engineered corn to the ethical implications of Dolly the cloned sheep—and the effects have been hit and miss.

"In order to vote intelligently or craft legislation, you must understand science and technology, and understanding scientific trends in this fast-moving world of ours is very difficult," admits Rep. Amo Houghton (R-N.Y.), whose family founded Corning, the nation's leading fiber optics company, 150 years ago. "I mean, I can vote on anything, but I can vote like an idiot."

Fortunately, some members of Congress are considering reviving the old OTA in some form or another. If history is any indication, though, the push for such an agency promises to be an unnecessarily partisan battle—one that won't draw much support from industry, whose influence on members of Congress might be muted if members had an outlet for unbiased information.

But if the party of President George W. Bush is really serious about showing its moderate, smart side, passing a bill reauthorizing the OTA would be a good place to start. As former OTA Director John H. Gibbons points out, "If you take the simple truism that science and technology now dominate our lives and our nation's future, that alone should tell you that those who are charged with governance need the capacity to access national wisdom in their formulation and decision making on public policy. And without OTA or its equivalent, they are in the dark without a floodlight."

Oracular Origins

Congress launched OTA in 1972 after a slew of acrid debates on topics ranging from the antiballistic missile treaty to DDT to supersonic transport. Frustrated lawmakers suddenly realized they had nowhere to shop for unbiased information, fully independent from the executive branch. With $5 million in funding, the fledgling OTA aspired, according to the law, "to provide early indications of the probable beneficial and adverse impacts of the applications of technology."

The legislation set up a bipartisan board of six senators and six representatives, equally split along party lines, to oversee OTA's activities. Once the board or a committee officially requested a study, OTA would assemble a project team to scour the literature, let contracts, and organize workshops. Mindful of keeping both sides happy, instead of pushing a specific policy, OTA reports outlined alternatives, spelling out pros and cons of each option.

Despite its well-reasoned mandate, OTA faced a near-death experience early thanks to partisan politics. For starters, many Republicans feared OTA might espouse an anti-technology bias and branded it the "Office of Technology Harassment." Many also feared OTA would unfairly fuel the political machinery of one of its greatest champions, Sen. Edward M. Kennedy (D-Mass.).

In 1977, Republicans smeared the office as Kennedy's plaything and pared its budget by more than 20 percent. The jousting began when *New York Times* columnist William Safire charged that Kennedy ousted its first director, Emilio Q. Daddario, in a campaign to "take over" OTA. Daddario, a former Democratic representative from Connecticut, drafted the original legislation but resigned to run for governor before its passage. In truth, he had planned a short stint at the top from the get-go—just long enough to establish his brainchild.

Kennedy's longtime assistant and OTA program manager, Ellis Mottur, was a logical choice to fill the slot. In time, Mottur withdrew from consideration and a Republican, former Delaware governor and industrial chemist Russell Peterson, was installed as the next director. Peterson cleanly depoliticized the agency by banning board members' staff from being housed at OTA. His term, however, would be short-lived. Peterson left 15 months later to lead the National Audubon Society.

When Gibbons, a physicist and Oak Ridge National Laboratory veteran, came on board, OTA still needed life support. Gibbons, who had previously served as a Nixon appointee as the first director of the Federal Office of Energy Conservation, recalls that after his swearing in ceremony in 1979, Rep. John D. Dingell (D-Mich.) shook his hand and said, "You're the last chance this organization has to survive."

Soon afterwards, OTA came under fire in Donald Lambro's 1980 treatise, *Fat City: How Washington Wastes Your Taxes*, as one of 100 federal programs recommended for abolition. Citing the gripes of many on the Hill, Lambro penned: "In practice, the agency's

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studies have proven to be duplicative, frequently shoddy, not altogether objective, and often ignored." On Gibbons' watch, such perceptions would wholly change.

Glory Days

By the mid-to-late '80s, the OTA had established itself as a fount of technological reason. The doctorate-rich agency, nestled in a Colonial-style brick building a javelin's throw from the Capitol dome, came to take meticulous care in generating its studies. It assembled myriad advisory panels to ensure fairness and authority. Typically, 100 reviewers scrutinized each report.

The nature of democracy ensures that there will always be morons in Congress. But for those legislators who want to make educated decisions for the country, there's not much help out there.

While OTA studied complex scientific and technological issues, it presented them in a format lay people could understand, and its reports never overlooked the human implications of technology. In its famous report on infertility treatments, for instance, OTA wrote: "It is 2 p.m. You are sitting with your wife in the doctor's office, waiting to be told what to do next to get your wife pregnant. You gave a semen sample two days ago to some lab person. You are sure that humiliating experience was just the beginning of many more. You are wondering how bad your sperm are."

That's not the stuff of your average General Accounting Office (GAO) report. The difference stemmed largely from a staff that was not just a bunch of pointy-headed engineers and scientists. When *The Washington Monthly* wrote about OTA in 1989, the agency staff included a guy with degrees in religious studies and forestry, a computer whiz with advanced degrees in forestry and soil science who was a lawyer and one of the world's leading oceanographers, and a registered nurse with a Ph.D. in philosophy.

That staff also supplemented its broad range of knowledge with a penchant for doing what few students of government ever do—getting out of the office. A researcher investigating truck safety once learned how to drive an 18-wheeler, and then sent one of her analysts out on a four-day cross-country trip with a driver. The resulting report reflected knowledge gleaned from that trip—including the revelation that government rest requirements had fallen victim to trucking company deadlines.

Consequently, OTA's independent-minded studies and testimony by its authors helped shape laws and budgets pertaining to everything from information technology to arms control to health care to biotech. OTA weighed in on debates over the 1980 Energy Security Act, Clean Air Act, Foreign Assistance Act, and Superfund legislation, among many others. Its reports, with titles like "Access to Space," "High Performance Computing," "Passive Smoking," and "Facing America's Trash," often prompted policy changes.

Time and again, both sides of the aisle quoted from OTA reports, illustrating the agency's objectivity. For example, more than a decade before the Oklahoma bombing, OTA issued a report, referenced during the floor debate by Democrats and Republicans alike, on the prospect of requiring chemical markers (called taggants) in explosives to readily trace their sources. More recently, the phenomenon occurred during the high-profile debates over the North American Free Trade Agreement and Oregon's Medicaid program.

Eventually, an OTA report's release became a news event in itself. Select journalists were sent advance copies, and the committee chair who commissioned a given report frequently called a news conference. Now and then, OTA's findings were read aloud before a joint House and Senate committee meeting. As a result of the thousands of news stories generated each year, the public—not just Congress—became more informed. The reports were often bestsellers at the Government Printing Office as well.

In retrospect, some OTA reports seem especially prescient. For instance, a 1975 take on oil transportation, more than a decade before the Exxon Valdez debacle, found "fitting double bottoms or double hulls on tankers offers a significant degree of protection from oil pollution." In 1980, years before NBC anchor Katie Couric's campaign in honor of her late husband, OTA examined the benefits of screening for colon cancer. A later report in 1995, also predating Couric, found colorectal cancer screening in average-risk adults to be cost effective and a "relatively good investment for society."

Some of its most influential—and most contro-

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versial—reports were on the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI). A 1988 report generated a rash of front-page stories and unmasked the technical infeasibility of the project to the public. Among its criticisms, OTA found, "there would always be" irresolvable questions about the dependability of Star Wars software. Although the administration and Pentagon officials pushed for its retraction, OTA refused to cower. "People called it 'Reagan's dream' for good reason," says Gibbons.

Gingrich led Congress to kill off its own technology think tank just as the country was experiencing an unprecedented high-tech boom.

OTA's glory days continued under Gibbons' successor Roger C. Herdman, a physician and a Republican, who took the reins in 1993. Between 1992 and 1994, a dozen OTA assessments won the National Association for Government Communicators' prestigious Blue Pencil Award and another dozen made the American Library Association's list of notable government documents culled from federal, state, and local documents around the world. Some reports, though five to 15 years old, are still cited today. For example, "OTA's report on the cost of prescription drugs is still a model," says Herdman, now at the National Academies' Institute of Medicine.

Despite its solid reputation for conducting credible, nonpartisan studies of technological issues, OTA suffered from accusations of partisan tinkering. "OTA was vulnerable to the charge that we were a Democratic agency because requests generally came from committee chairmen," says Vary Coates, a former senior OTA analyst who wrote her doctoral dissertation on the agency. "It wasn't our fault the chairmen were Democratic for most of OTA's existence." That Gibbons jumped from OTA head in 1993 to become Bill Clinton's chief science advisor didn't do much to dispel the perception of OTA partisanship.

In 1994, when Republicans swept Congress, OTA went up on the chopping block. Without ever reading a single OTA report, many freshmen riding the 1994 Republican Revolution into office erased it from the House budget bill. House Speaker Newt Gingrich and loyal ally Robert Walker (R-Penn.), who ruled the House Science Committee, tower as the biggest villains in the minds of the OTA faithful. Deposed OTA director Herdman says, "The speaker had his own ideas about what he wanted to do with science, and he didn't want anything that would conflict with those."

The $22 million agency made an easy mark as a symbol of Congress' willingness to sacrifice its own appendage. Its larger and older cousins, the GAO, established in 1921, and the Congressional Research Service (CRS), in 1913, had devout followings. Even though the Congressional Budget Office was established in 1974, two years after OTA, it had quickly cultivated a broader constituency. OTA guided Congress with an invisible hand, and while its low-profile, nonpartisan stance strengthened its advisory capacity, it failed at self-promotion and credit mongering that would have countered arguments that OTA was too slow to be useful.

Walker, who now heads the D.C.-based Wexler Group, contends lack of timelessness proved to be the agency's fatal flaw. "It couldn't keep up. By the time their reports would come out, the legislative issues would have been resolved," he says.

Rather than fix what they saw as a problem, though, Republican leaders just threw the baby out with the bathwater. Raging like Ned Ludd against 19th-century machinery, OTA's detractors never bothered with nuances. Had they done so, they might have discovered that OTA epitomized smart government.

Many Republicans also hadn't forgotten OTA's report assailing SDI, Reagan's pet program. "OTA made a lot of enemies with that SDI report," says Michael Rodemeyer, a former minority legislative director of the House Science Committee, now executive director of the Pew Initiative on Food and Biotechnology.

Houghton, a Republican who was arguably OTA's staunchest supporter in the House, attempted to rescue the agency by transferring it under the Library of Congress (which houses CRS). The Librarian of Congress, James Billington, however, lobbied against the move fearing the agency might jeopardize library funding. In the end, the Senate Appropriations Committee narrowly voted down the measure. Efforts to resuscitate the agency on the Senate floor and in the conference committee also failed. OTA was dismantled in September 1995.

A mellowing Gingrich now denies killing OTA for partisan reasons. In his new roles as web guru (www.Newt.org), and fellow at the American Enter-

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prise Institute and Stanford University's Hoover Institution, Gingrich doesn't deny that elected officials need to be educated on pertinent technical issues. He just doesn't like the idea of the government doing the educating. "The concept of science really matters," Gingrich stresses. "There are just better ways to get the job done." Legislators need to have direct discussions with scientists and engineers, Gingrich says, arguing that using OTA as an intermediary made Congress more insular.

Gingrich now has his own plan for filling the OTA void. He says he seeks "to bring the best people in the world together" to blend technology and policy. He just wants to rely on the wisdom of existing groups formed in the cauldron of the marketplace. His recipe calls for a mechanism to build a strong relationship between Congress and the National Academies, the nation's most elite scientists, engineers, and doctors. Moreover, scientists from federal agencies like NASA and the NSF and such nonprofits as the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) would be brought into the fold. And who would coordinate this cacophony of intelligent highmindedness? He suggests the House Science Committee, which, if you know the size of its staff and its existing workload, isn't especially comforting.

Necessary Losses?

As Ehlers' experience demonstrates, relying on existing bodies to educate Congress isn't working too well so far. It's no surprise, really. Anybody who reads Ann Landers would know that solely relying on members of Congress to consult directly with engineers is a formula for disaster. For the most part, techies and politicos don't speak a common language. And core human values often get lost in translation, since techies aren't necessarily charged with considering the broader social implications associated with their work.

The only institution that regularly churns out missives with the equivalent heft of the OTA are the National Academies. The Academies have already become a sort of refuge for OTA exiles. Former directors Gibbons, Herdman, and several assistant directors have signed on. But Academy reports are no faster in coming than OTA's, and they are written in a more academic style. Although influential, they often stop at the scientific findings or suggest a few structural alterations instead of taking it all the way to the policy level. "The products are different," says Jim Jensen, director of NAS's Office of Congressional and Governmental Affairs and a former OTA deputy.

In addition, the Academies are not immune to professional biases. Case in point: A long-overdue report released last spring on plants genetically modified to ward off pests thrilled industry leaders and agricultural groups. It found no evidence that biotech foods already inundating the marketplace are unsafe.

But various activists protested outside the Academy. Among them was Rep. Dennis J. Kucinich (D-Ohio) who charged that the 12-member Academy committee that fashioned the report was "tainted" by conflicts of interest. Several panelists previously accepted funds from the biotech industry. Another had provided legal services to biotech kingpin Monsanto. And the study's first director departed midway to take a job with BIO, the leading industry trade group.

In the end, private groups will never wield the legitimacy of a government agency that is unsullied by commercial interests. For all these reasons, a steadfast core believes a successor to the OTA serves the national interest. Not only is momentum emerging to promote this, but many original OTA slayers in Congress have exited voluntarily or have been voted out of office. M. Granger Morgan, head of Carnegie Mellon University's department of engineering and public policy, is organizing a forum in late spring or early summer to jump start "a serious national conversation" on the issue. He's secured $45,000 from the MacArthur Foundation and the Heinz Family Endowment to propose and evaluate potential models.

Because the authorizing legislation is still on the books, however, the simplest route for revival would be refunding the former agency. Rep. Kucinich's staff investigated the OTA idea last summer, but the relative newcomer from Ohio hasn't made any commitments. OTA warhorse Sen. Kennedy, not surprisingly, is hopeful that this year "Congress can reach a bi-partisan agreement to resurrect OTA."

Republicans should get over their blanket opposition to government and get on the OTA bandwagon—or get left behind. Even the public is starting to sense that technology is a relentless, burgeoning force probably every bit as influential in their lives as Congress itself. Any steps that lessen Congress's savvy in managing its complexity may place one of democracy's greatest institutions at risk of obsolescence. Given that the federal government is spending scores of billions a year on science and technology, $22 million for OTA seems a paltry price to pay for understanding. "There's an enormous opportunity to be guided by scientific knowledge. That can only come out of a group like [OTA]," Houghton says. ●

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No More Fast Times At Ridgemont High

What if Molly Ringwald had gone to a charter school?

BY MICHAEL SCHAFFER

JOHN HUGHES TAUGHT ME HOW TO BE American. The king of the 1980s teen flick, Hughes made millions, and helped establish a genre, with sweet comedies of adolescent manners like *Sixteen Candles* and *The Breakfast Club*, set in and around the high schools of Chicago's northern suburbs. The movie plots ran like Archie Andrews comics, updated—though not very much—for the MTV generation.

Like most of Hughes' audience, of course, I didn't live by Lake Michigan. Unlike most of them, I lived in Bangladesh, where my parents had been assigned by the foreign service—and where, with the help of an endless supply of pirated videotapes, I tried desperately to keep up with the American pop culture my folks' career had so viciously denied me. I knew, sort of, that Archie's Riverdale High was absurd. But Hughes' suburbia I consumed uncritically. When your only friends are the equally bewildered offspring of Danish, Dutch, or Korean globetrotters, you take what certainty you can get.

And so thanks to Hughes and his colleagues, I knew exactly what to expect when I moved home at age 14. High school would be big and crucial; my standing in its hierarchy of jocks and brains and losers would determine my happiness. Like any true, red-blooded American kid, I knew I would care desperately about the football game, the dance afterwards, and the big, drunken party to follow. Hey—I'd watched the instructional video.

My parents, as it turned out, had other ideas. They sent me to a small private school and a life devoid of the events that provided the climactic moments of the high school movies that once served as my cultural umbilical cord. I'm sure I put it somewhat more impolitely at the time, but I felt, again, somehow disconnected from the common terrain of my country. And like a good 14-year old, all I wanted was to be as normal a part of that terrain as possible. Just as I'd felt that moving to South Asia wasn't normal, I knew that not having cheerleaders and homecoming games wasn't normal, either.

Today, I might not be so sure. Like everything from TV to fruit juice, schools in America have undergone a revolution in the '90s, morphing from a world of few choices to a veritable rainbow of individual options. We have hundreds of satellite channels and almost as many variations—pulp-free, calcium-rich, mango-spritzed—of orange juice. And the education marketplace doesn't seem to be far behind. Magnet schools lure the best and brightest (or, sometimes, the worst and most hardened) to one central location. Vouchers, the controversial program to allow public-school dollars to pay students' private-school tuitions, have gotten the most attention. But the biggest practical impact may yet come from the charter school movement, which creates specially focused new public schools that are independent of the public school system's bureaucracy and regulation.

Nationally, charter schools operate in 34 different states, according to the nonprofit Center for Educational Reform. Half a million students attend charters, a number that's growing rapidly. Last May, President Clinton declared the first ever National Charter Schools Week. A second one is already scheduled for this coming spring, to be declared by President Bush.

In the District of Columbia, meanwhile, the move-

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ment is perhaps at its strongest. Ten percent of the city's 70,000 public school students now attend charters such as the Maya Angelou Public Charter School, the Elsie Whitlow Stokes Community Freedom School, and the Techworld Public Charter School. With public oversight hampered by a convoluted school-governance system, it's actually quite easy to get a charter—and the tax money that comes with it. Nearly everyone on either side of the debate agrees that D.C.'s charter population will grow even bigger in coming years.

Predictably, the charter experiment has spurred considerable speculation among education experts. Proponents say it'll free teachers from bureaucratic red tape. Opponents say it'll wreck teachers' standard of living while channeling tax dollars to educational hucksters. What no one has talked about, though, is the movement's cultural impact. From inner cities to suburban tract districts, the big general-interest high school has for decades been a common piece of the American educational landscape, and more importantly, of the adolescence of most Americans. For all the differences between Hughes' Highland Park, Illinois and most other places, his movies appealed to wide audiences because they took place in an arena whose rituals and stock characters most viewers could relate to.

But that's not an arena a theater audience could very well understand if, say, half of them had attended small schools dedicated to science, foreign languages, or even—this one already exists—"the hospitality industry." Who'd make sense of the hulking football teams (at a school of just 300 kids, even regular-sized people could play), the lunch-table segregation by activity group (the band dorks would all be at the special music school anyway), and even the hallways so long that the teachers don't notice when the greaser stuffs the nerd into a locker?

Not quite a cultural revolution, the rise of charters—if they become a major factor nationally—nonetheless posits something quite contrary to the rhetoric of community and tradition used by its major proponents: the erosion of another piece of Americans' shared cultural space. That's no reason to support or oppose charters, of course. After all, there's no intrinsic cultural value to nerds getting stuffed in lockers just because it makes for familiar cinematic terrain. But it is something worth noting as the debate about school choice proceeds.

There's no intrinsic cultural value to nerds getting stuffed in lockers, but it is something worth noting as the debate about school choice proceeds.

Back to School

Before it housed a couple hundred high schoolers, Irasema Salcido's school building was home to a catering business. The building next door—today also a school—used to be a laundry. It still has the sign to prove it. On the other side of Salcido's building is a car lot, ringed with chainlink and barbed wire. They still sell used cars there.

A little over a year ago, Salcido moved her nascent Cesar Chavez Public Charter High School for Public Policy into the industrial block in Washington's Cardozo neighborhood. Kids, of course, can make a space look old pretty fast. The walls are plastered with flyers announcing everything from the students of the month to an after-school college-bound program to an HIV-prevention effort. And that skateboard that some 11th graders are using for a physics experiment looks pretty certain to leave marks on the short corridor's floor.

On the other hand, plenty about the space—even after you walk past the loading bay to the schoolhouse door, which is around back of the building—makes it clear that this is no ordinary school. Signs on doors remain makeshift. The lockers have been awkwardly jammed into the space that doubles as a cafeteria. If it looks like one of those laboratories hidden by the government in an old warehouses in "The X Files," it's no wonder.

"Right now we're renting," says Salcido. "If we can secure a lease for three years, that will let us raise money" to find or build an actual schoolhouse for the 240 students Salcido expects when her three-year-old institution reaches capacity.

Salcido is one of the best-regarded charter educators in her city's often scandal-plagued charter system. Watching her walk the hallways, it's easy to see why. Unable to speak without digressing into a pep talk, she

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speaks optimistically about routing her school's almost entirely minority student body to college, to careers, the kinds of places the city's ordinary schools, cheerleaders and marching bands notwithstanding, have proven unable to deliver. She knows the name and background of just about every student we pass in the school's cramped confines. Given the choice between Chavez and an ordinary high school, it's no surprise that these kids' parents are eager to break with pretty much anything connected to the traditional public schools.

But for the high schoolers at Cesar Chavez, Salcido's school also represents a departure for some more neutral aspects of the American educational experience. The school has no band, no theater, and no traditional sports program. It does have colors—red and black, the colors of its namesake's United Farm Workers union—but no team name or mascot. It has no playground ("We take them to Malcolm X Park" nearby, says Salcido), let alone a gym. Salcido says the school has never had a dance.

In other words, it's nothing you'd recognize if you learned about America from an Archie comic or a teen movie. In the John Hughes universe, in fact, the school might seem downright un-American. And that—considering that America's schools regularly fail kids like the ones at Cesar Chavez—is just the way it's intended to be.

High School Consequential

Hollywood thrives on shared experience. Long after World War II had offered up seemingly every last possible movie script, Hollywood kept making movies about the war. The reason was simple. In the '40s and '50s, military service was something most theatergoers, or at least someone they were close to, had experienced. The end of the draft, then, marked a significant cultural shift independent of its military meaning.

Sometime after *Star Wars* hit theaters, movie studios realized that teenagers were a path to box-office gold. If the movie was good enough, they might watch it five times each. Hence the horror flicks and high school romances of the '80s, and their more recent successors.

But shared experience—and the ways mass culture interprets it—is a little more complicated than making everyone cheer when the Nazi sub sinks for the 78th time, or when the football captain once again asks out the shy-but-pretty girl we're all pulling for. Whatever the education experts say about its academic merits (or lack thereof), the pop culture American high school of jocks and nerds, of big proms and bigger parking lots, has met its share of cultural criticism, especially from the Left.

To the academic Left, high school is part of capitalism's indoctrination machine. Its football teams, they say, glorify violent masculinity. Its prom queens lock into place retrograde gender roles. Its very size exists to prepare kids to be cogs in corporate America. And on and on. Outside the academy, the criticism tends to be more personal, though no more friendly. "High school was terrifying, and it was the casual cruelty of the popular kids—the jocks and the princesses—that made it hell," wrote the columnist Dan Savage in the wake of the Columbine High School shooting. "Like most students, I lived in fear of the small slights and public humiliations used to reinforce the rigid high school caste system: Poor girls were sluts, soft boys were fags."

Politically, though, the Left hasn't quite joined in the fight to place kids in schools like Cesar Chavez and destroy the old-fashioned petri dishes of oppression. The reasons are understandable. Sticking it to the bureaucracy, in contemporary America, sounds to leftists like a secret plan to gut teacher salaries, unions, and other things liberals are supposed to support. In fact, the most vocal supporter of charter schools in Washington is Rep. Ernest Istook (R-Okla.), who chairs one of the conservative House subcommittees that oversees the District. Istook delights in blasting the bureaucrats or teachers'-unions types who drag their feet on converting public schools into charters.

But a movement to stick it to tax-sucking school administrators can have a lot of surprising consequences. The kind of schools that charter proponents are building represent a break from all sorts of American norms. Could a family-values right-winger like Istook really be against such great American traditions as fielding an 80-member cheerleading squad or beating the piss out of the sissies behind the oversized gym? Not quite. "A lot of that has changed already, of course," he says of the Hollywood view of adolescents and the schools that educate them, or at least provide them a backdrop for big-screen romances. "It's not exactly *American Graffiti* or the malt shop anymore, anyway. It's evolved from that experience," he says.

True enough. In fact, it never was *American Graffiti*—and even if it had been, in a country where school for too many people is remembered as an education mill rather than a stimulating environment, there's no reason to mourn the passing of a time when everyone went through oversized, broadly-focused schools. There was also no reason to mourn the passing of an era when there were just three TV networks to watch, or one color of car to drive. Or, say, when young men's lives were interrupted by a draft. But when that era faded, the nation gained a little more freedom and lost a little piece of common ground in the process—the kind of thing that sells movies, and also the kind of thing that helps, in dribs and drabs, to make us a country. ●

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Campaign Lite

Why reporters won't tell us what we need to know

BY BILL KOVACH AND TOM ROSENSTIEL

THE FIRST PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION of the 21st century may go down in history as the moment when campaigning disappeared into private space. Eighty years ago, radio allowed people to hear candidates by their firesides for the first time. Thirty years later, television added pictures, which transformed even party conventions into events arranged for people to absorb in their living rooms. Video tapes, computers, and direct mail added to the precision. This year, the Internet, with its personal "cookie" technology, joined automated celebrity phone calls, push-poll proselytizing, issue Web sites, and political e-mails to drive politics even further into a personalized, invisible space.

All this has presented a challenge for journalists, a challenge that the 2000 campaign suggests we are failing to understand. As the mechanics of the campaigns have become more sophisticated, the press has changed the way it focuses its attention. Unfortunately, however, the press has moved further away from the invisible space where elections now largely occur. The new culture of political journalism gives us a better understanding of large-scale campaign mechanics, but a weaker grasp of how voters are actually reacting. As a result, we have a shallower understanding of what our elections say about America, and why elections turn out the way they do.

Political Reporting to Campaign Reporting

In the last decade, the press has turned more of its focus to understanding the mechanics, tactics, and strategies of increasingly elaborate campaigns. This may seem a natural response—even logical. But it has significant implications for citizens. Political reporting has given way to something else—and something narrower. It has become campaign reporting. In 2000, the Committee of Concerned Journalists and the Project for Excellence in Journalism conducted four studies of campaign coverage that offered clear evidence of the trend.

The first study examined 430 stories in five major newspapers and nine programs on five television networks over the two-week period leading up to the Iowa caucuses and the New Hampshire primary. This was when voters were just beginning to focus seriously on the presidential campaigns. The study reveals that during that period, the press provided only scant reporting on the candidates' backgrounds, records, or ideas. Remarkably, less than one percent of the stories—two of the 430—explored the candidates' past records in office with more than a passing reference. Instead reporters focused more than 80 percent of their stories on matters that affect the campaigns or the political parties (i.e., changes in tactics, fundraising strategies, and internal organizational problems).

This focus knocked Bush's main competitors, except John McCain, out of the race, and it played a crucial role in the final lap before the election as well. The October debates were notable, particularly the first, for being substantive and outlining differences of philosophy and policy between the two major candidates. But a study of the coverage during this period found that the reporting on the debates was quite different. In all, seven out of 10 stories focused on either the candidates' television performances or their

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strategies. Less than one in 10 stories focused on the candidates' policy differences; three percent were framed around the veracity of a campaign or candidate; a mere one percent focused on their broader vision for the country.

News You Can't Use

At times, the coverage read more like reviews than news. Just 14 percent of the pre- and post-debate stories were written as straight news, except for those about pure logistics. The great majority were notably thematic or interpretive. Consider David Von Drehle's front-page story in *The Washington Post* about the third debate: "The bigger man never looked so big as he did inside the debate hall tonight. Vice President Al Gore has a couple of inches and a couple of pounds on Texas Governor George Bush—but it might have well been feet and tons ... Bush read Gore's effort to overshadow him and, in an odd way, opted to make himself a bit smaller. There was something puppy-like about him."

The coverage also tilted more towards performance criticism as time went on, the study found. For example, Richard L. Berke's lead story in *The New York Times* on the first debate began: "Vice President Al Gore and Gov. George W. Bush presented starkly different stands on issues ranging from taxes to abortion to oil drilling tonight as Mr. Gore repeatedly cast Mr. Bush as a friend of the rich and Mr. Bush upbraided his rival as a Washington insider."

By the third debate, Berke's lead account, by contrast, went 22 paragraphs before outlining any policy positions. Even then, it cast these positions in the context of theater instead of policy. The first substantive policy mention in the story was this: "One of the most heated exchanges was over reducing the cost of prescription drugs."

Covering the mechanics, strategies, and performance of the campaigns allows reporters to become more subjective and interpretative. Assessing a campaign's strategy is safer than making judgments about a candidate's plans for Social Security. It's also easier. No one is going to accuse the reporter of ideological bias or ignorance. One can write more freely in the style of Von Drehle. Thus, the push to offer something more than simple facts also reinforces the focus on mechanics and tactics.

This focus on campaign-as-theater redounded to Bush's benefit. Bush, by most judgments, ran the better campaign. And in October, the committee study found that coverage of the two candidates was twice as likely to be negative toward Gore as it was toward Bush. The benefit went the other way as well: Coverage of Bush was twice as likely to be positive than was Gore's throughout late September and into late October. The result of this lens is that we have a sophisticated understanding of the intricacies of media buying, push polling, the techniques of consultants, the nuances of ad-making, and other tactical considerations.

In the process, however, reporters became adjuncts of the campaigns they covered. They became, as Susan Herbst noted in her book, *Numbered Voices: How Opinion Polling Has Shaped American Politics*, "particularly interested in how consultants work. These days, the names of major consultants are almost as familiar ... as the names of candidates." As the journalists become more concerned with strategies and tactics of the campaigns they cover, their perspectives come to reflect those of the consultants and managers who necessarily see voters as an abstract mass that can be manipulated and moved with just the right mixture of fear and promise.

The consultants and campaign professionals themselves are focused on the presentation of a candidate rather than the substance of his ideas. Bob Shrum and Karl Rove don't tell Gore or Bush what to believe, but they can shape how the candidates present it. Implicit in the focus on campaign mechanics is a cynicism about voters, a notion that they respond to the amount of rouge Gore might be wearing, his hair style, or the body language of the candidates during campaigns. Bush's unexamined position on Social Security is a given; the news is whether he flubbed the numbers. This implicit sense of a readily manipulated public bleeds into the coverage, suggesting citizens are so much putty being shaped by artisans. The critical issue is what has been lost.

Politics is broader than campaigns. In the hands of the father of modern reporting, Theodore White, presidential elections were quadrennial mirrors on the nation. The point of the election in White's work was less who won than why—what the election told us about ourselves as a people. This kind of political reporting is concerned with a dizzying array of information, which is now missing in political coverage.

Voters Become Abstractions

As the campaign has moved into the private space of people's homes, the press has not followed it there. The campaigns are narrowcasting, but because

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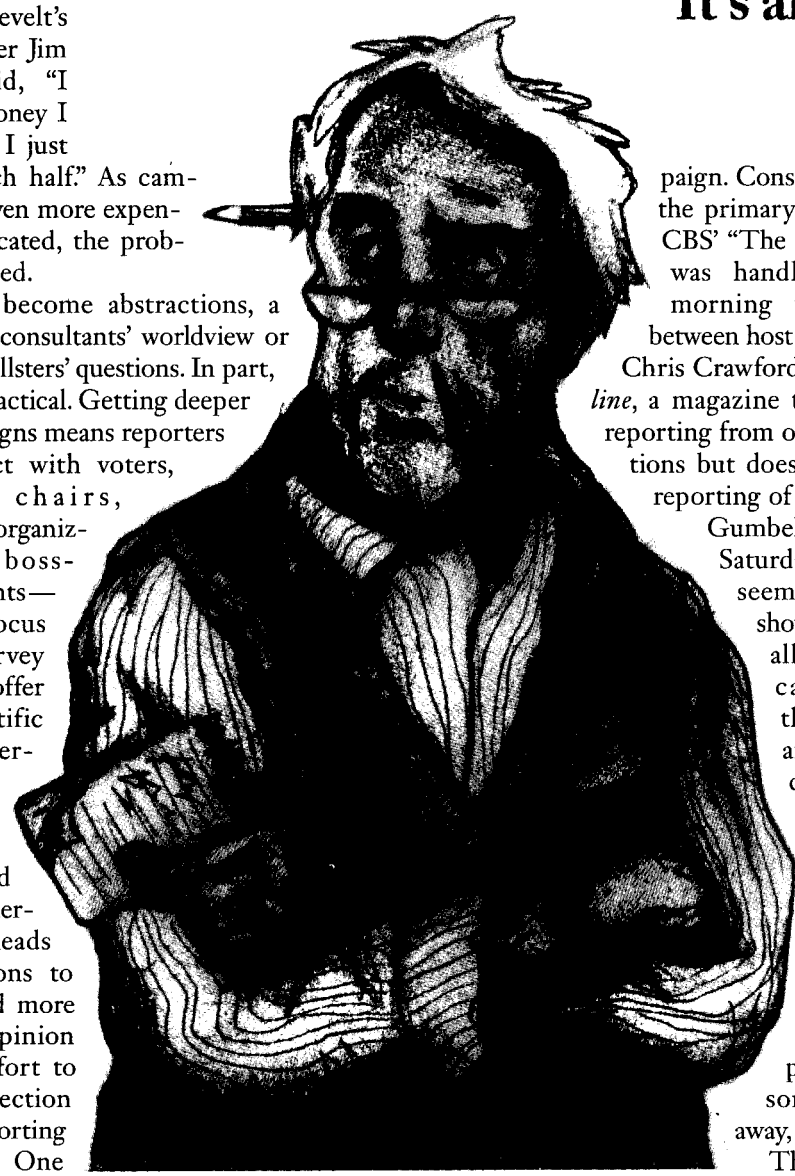
journalists are trying to understand the intricate nature of the campaign organization and strategies, we are less able to understand the effects of that narrowcasting. It is axiomatic that the press is always trying to cover the previous campaign, but the changes in campaigning have occurred so rapidly that we have fallen further than four years behind. With each campaign, the press focuses on the new uses of technology and sophisticated management but falls even further from understanding their effect on voters. Effects are always elusive. Franklin Roosevelt's campaign manager Jim Farley once said, "I know half the money I spend is wasted. I just don't know which half." As campaigns become even more expensive and sophisticated, the problem is compounded.

Voters have become abstractions, a reflection of the consultants' worldview or the creation of pollsters' questions. In part, the problem is practical. Getting deeper inside the campaigns means reporters have less contact with voters, county party chairs, local political organizers, activists, and bosses. Consultants—with their focus group and survey data—appear to offer a more scientific shortcut to ascertaining the public's views. This lack of contact with voters and local political leadership in turn leads news organizations to depend more and more on public-opinion polling in an effort to forge a connection between their reporting and the public. One result is a sense that the public doesn't care about the race or about politics, since that is the impression left more by polls than by actually talking to voters. Even network focus groups find political coverage bad for ratings. This anti-political attitude seeps into reporting in odd ways, even in the form of an overt cynicism about the authenticity and value of the campaign. Consider the coverage of the primary debates offered by CBS' "The Early Show," which was handled each Monday morning with glib chatter between host Bryant Gumbel and Chris Crawford, the editor of *Hotline*, a magazine that aggregates the reporting from other news organizations but does little or no actual reporting of its own.

Assessing the campaign's strategy is safer than making judgments about the candidates' plans for Social Security. It's also easier.



Gumbel: "I stumbled upon Saturday's [debate] and it seemed a rather sad show. I mean, here were all the Republican candidates sitting there on a Saturday afternoon answering questions from people in Iowa, and it seemed like, you know, it was just going through the motions."

Crawford: "Yeah, ... these debates are sort of like phantom pain ... It's sort of—it's gone away, but we still feel it."

The reliance on polls

Art by C. Larson

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versus people becomes self-fulfilling. "[W]hen newspaper journalists use the sample survey to describe public opinion on an issue, they are less likely to conduct in-depth interviews with knowledgeable citizens and political activists," Herbst writes. Such door-knocking is laborious and seems unnecessary. It also can seem less useful, since it's less scientific. But is this assumption correct?

Who's There?

Polls obviously have the advantage of large representative samples. But they are constricted by the limits of the questions. The reporter lacks the serendipity of discovering how voters frame ideas in their own minds. Anyone who has talked to voters over time knows that the rationale campaign professionals or polling researchers may use is often quite different than the constructions that voters arrive at. In a country of 100 million voters, there are far more reasons why people vote than can be found in a survey—and they may not always seem rational. One need look only at the few stories by reporters who do talk to voters to see it. When Jennifer Steinhauer of *The New York Times* interviewed people in their neighborhoods near Pittsburgh, this is just what she found. "For some people, the shifts [in attitudes about the candidates] have sprung from large single events—a convention speech, a tax proposal, a choice of running mate. But for many others, their change in thinking has emerged from the smallest but most resonant of details, like a well-placed bottle of wine in a televised home video of Al Gore ... or the discovery that Mr. Bush's running mate did not favor the Head Start program. Rebecca Hepka, 23, was more or less indifferent to the race until she heard one of Mr. Gore's people use the term 'living wage,' which sent her into paroxysm of rage and made her decide to vote for Mr. Bush. 'I don't like that term, no way,' said Ms. Hepka, who sells medical insurance. 'I don't want to give away all my taxes to have other people set up for life,' she added." A survey won't help you understand a voter like Ms. Hepka, who only became passionate after hearing a tangentially related phrase.

Such insights are not discerned by polls, but they reinforce all the odd, idiosyncratic, and unexpected nuances of elections that political reporters who have spent time with voters have encountered themselves. This is the kind of stuff that makes politics interesting. It also does not comport with the rationality of polling questions, focus groups, and consultant-driven use of language. The disconnection from voters increased exponentially in 2000 with the explosion in the use of daily tracking polls by the media. This development has come as a direct result of the rapid growth of the number of outlets for news and information spawned by the new communications technology. Even outlets that devote few resources to reporting, such as MSNBC, apparently feel a need to brand themselves with their own poll. The growing reliance on tracking polls adds another dimension to this shallowing out of our understanding of voters. Tracking polls are different from more in-depth, stand-alone polls. They were originally used by campaigns to test the efficacy of ads and other tactical maneuvers. The samples were too small, and the margins of errors too large, to trust the actual numbers. But the trend lines up or down were considered an important indication of whether the latest maneuver was working. ABC was the first news organization to use them in New Hampshire to sense motion toward Gary Hart. But the precise numbers were considered too rough for anyone to put on the air until CNN did so in 1988.

By 2000, any inhibitions had been swept away. A host of news organizations, from *The Washington Post* and *USA Today* to CNN and MSNBC, featured daily tracking in their coverage. As it turns out the polls were generally accurate, since the race was usually well within the margin of error, but most of the reporting failed to communicate the margin of error or its real meaning—a margin of error of plus or minus three points does not mean a spread of three or less indicates a tie. The margin of error applies to each candidate's number, which means the margin is closer to six points. Thus even the polls that predicted, the day before the election, a slight popular vote victory for Bush were technically accurate.

The bigger issue is that tracking polls are limited, with only occasional exceptions, to measuring *only* the horse race. Unlike more in-depth polls, they rarely get at the reasons behind voter attitudes or the reasons behind any shifts in those attitudes. They tell us how the race is going, but never why. That is left to reporters to infer, and they don't seem equipped to do this well.

Coverage of citizens tends to take on a surreal dimension. Journalists, especially on television, assemble citizens into the artificial surroundings of focus groups and dial groups, especially to listen to debates. They remove people from their homes and communities. Social scientists scoff at the value of such unrepresentative and easily manipulated environments. Talking to voters at their kitchen tables can offer the reporter endless clues about how someone

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really thinks.

The Meta-Narrative

To bridge the loss of connection with the public, journalists have begun to rely on story-telling themes as a way of organizing the campaign in an engaging manner. They use story lines such as: Bush is a different kind of conservative. Bush is a natural politician. Bush is dumb. The Bush campaign is in shambles. Gore is a stiff. Gore is a liar. Gore is a political carnivore. We call these story lines the meta-narrative. As campaigns progress, coverage swings from one meta-narrative to another, and sometimes the story lines begin to contradict each other. The meta-narrative poses grave risks for journalists.

One difficulty is that the narrative tends to trump reporters' judgment. It becomes difficult for an individual reporter to write a story that differs from the popular meta-narratives. How does one write a story in which Bush is a good debater when the conventional wisdom holds that he is not? Ann Richards, the one politician who had been up against Bush in debates, warned reporters not to underestimate him, but her hard-earned wisdom was seldom reported. An initial faulty performance early in the primaries set the meta-narrative that Bush could not hold his own, and he benefited from this enormously in the general election.

The second problem is what to do with facts that betray the meta-narrative. The most dramatic case in 2000 is the argument that Gore was a liar. After *The Washington Monthly* cast doubt over several of the key allegations of Gore's lying, journalist Mickey Kaus decided to scour "the whole, worst case against Gore," expecting to find that the vice president really was a serial liar. Kaus found, to his surprise, "Gore isn't as big a liar as I thought."

Gore's claim that he "invented" the Internet was a misquote. He actually said he "took the initiative in creating the Internet," and it is true that he took the initiative in getting funding for it. Gore, it turns out, actually was one of the prototypes for the male character in the book *Love Story*, though his wife was never the prototype for the female character. Gore's fudge on his abortion record, Kaus concluded, was "mostly a bum rap." And Gore did support campaign finance reform in the Senate, though the bill was not yet called the McCain-Feingold bill. As for Gore's discovering the Love Canal toxic waste site, Gore never said he did. The meta-narrative of Gore as liar led to strange epistemological debates in the press over whose lies were more serious, Gore's because

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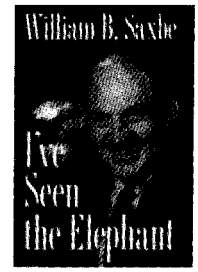
William B. Saxbe with Peter D. Franklin



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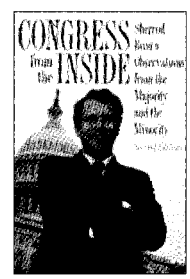

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they were so niggling or Bush's because they were about bigger things. It's not that Gore didn't lie, but the notion that this defined who he was—or distinguished him as a less honest person—was questionable.

There are other examples of facts not supporting the dominant story line of the moment. When Bush's campaign appeared to be in trouble after the conventions, the notion that he was a bumbling idiot—helped initially by an ambush interview by a Boston TV station—resurfaced. Bush's habit for malapropisms became a sign that he had sub-par intelligence for a man in public life.

Perhaps just as easily, Bush's misstatements could have been accepted as the flaws of anyone under pressure and constantly on the record. But they fit a meta-narrative—despite the evidence of his performance in the debates and his popularity as Texas governor. In reality, Bush's lack of intelligence and Gore's lying are examples of media stereotyping—all in an effort to forge a connection with citizens that has been lost through the neglect of more compelling storytelling.

Even worse, the meta-narrative device can become an impediment to reconnecting with voters. In the early months of the campaign, journalists assumed that the race for president would come down to character, since there was supposedly little meaningful policy difference between the candidates. By the eve of the conventions in midsummer, that meta-narrative had been turned on its head. Policy differences were the decisive factor, and the conventions focused on these matters as much as anything.

Either the public is tuning out the press or simply rejecting what it has to say. Whichever it is, the evidence suggests that the public forms different impressions of the candidates than the meta-narratives the press offers.

A study by the Committee of Concerned Journalists of the five months of coverage from February to June probed the major character themes the press used to organize the race for audiences. Using a sample of one week from each month, the study found a striking similarity among reporters on how they defined Bush and Gore.

The most common theme of the campaign was that Gore was scandal-tainted. This accounted for 42 percent of all the assertions about Gore's character. The second most common assertions about Gore was that he was a liar. These accounted for 34 percent of stories about him. The least common of the major themes, accounting for 14 percent of assertions, was that he was competent, experienced, and knowledgeable.

It is arguable how accurate a picture these themes paint of the former vice president. Regardless, the study made it fairly clear that at least as of July, citizens either were not receiving or not accepting the messages the media were offering them.

While the least common theme about Gore was his competence, by late July the public was more likely to attribute this feature to Gore than any other quality surveyed, and noticeably more than for Bush. Similarly, despite the heavy press coverage of Gore as scandal-tainted, by late July, only a quarter of the public attributed this to Gore.

The most common assertion in the coverage about Bush was that he was a different kind of Republican. This accounted for fully 40 percent of all assertions about the Texas governor. Next was the idea that he was unintelligent, which accounted for 26 percent of character assertions. Last was that he was coasting on his family name and connections, which accounted for 10 percent of assertions about him.

Yet again, the public had formed quite different impressions. On the eve of the conventions, a greater percentage of Americans actually attributed being "a different kind of politician" to Gore than to Bush, despite the coverage. A slightly greater percentage of Americans also attributed "not being a serious person" to Gore than to Bush as well. And though it received little coverage, the most common perception of either candidate was that Bush had gotten where he was on family connections. The one point that ultimately stuck with voters was Gore's shading of the truth, but the public did not come to this judgment until after the debates.

Here, early press coverage probably helped shape attitudes but voters still had to see for themselves. One may question the rationality of these public judgments, but that is precisely the point. The public is less monolithic than either polling or crude story lines can cope with. It may also be less logical. The pluralistic nature of the American electorate suggests that trying to weave a complex campaign into a single narrative is fraught with difficulties. The older method of reporting—the inverted pyramid of the daily campaign story—may no longer work in an era when people already have instantaneous access to the news and are skeptical of what politicians have to say. But the thematic narrative may be a dangerous substitute.

We Understand Spin Doctors, But Not Substance

Taken together, the move inside campaigns, the

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loss of connection with voters, and the reliance on faulty story lines create a serious vulnerability in the modern campaign press culture. We have a better understanding than ever before of what is occurring inside campaigns at any moment. We have a stronger understanding of the horse race and more information about the strategies inside the campaigns. We know the "what" of campaigns as never before, but we have little idea why.

Despite the televised debates and an extraordinary quantity of coverage of the campaign, the meaning of the 2000 election remains remarkably opaque. We know less about the underlying factors of this race than we did at the time of other close races, including those in 1960, 1968, and 1976. The reason is that the bulk of the information provided about the public was how it factored into the grand plan of the campaigns, not on the leadership it expected from the ultimate winner.

Talking to voters at their kitchen tables can offer the reporter endless clues about how people really think.

The definition of political reporting has been seriously thinned. This not only robs us of understanding; arguably, it makes it harder for the victor to govern. It also leads to press coverage of government as a continuing campaign, dictated by winning the war for the message of the day, and measured by another set of polls. The ability of a president to accomplish anything is determined by the latest approval rating. These trends cannot be laid entirely at the feet of the press. But as we understand the mentality of the spin doctor and the consultant better, we have come to view the world through their eyes, and helped make their definitions self-fulfilling.

Solutions

How can journalists think about covering these campaigns in more meaningful ways? Evidently, especially after the election-night debacle, many news organizations are already rethinking their campaign coverage. We suggest a few ideas that might not only make election reporting more accurate, but also make the coverage more relevant to the audience.

Armed with the understanding of changing demographics the polls provide, the election cycle could be preceded by reporting on the changing society and the issues that energize it. Not only will this reporting help us recognize how communities have changed, but it would focus on the trends that the successful candidates will face once in office. There is no better context within which to report an election than the changing face of the community. Because it might really connect with voters where they live and also make the election coverage relevant, it might even draw journalism and the public closer together.

Journalists should also think about how members of a community come to their political conclusions and where they discuss their political judgments. Most news organizations conduct very sophisticated surveys of how people in their regions spend their time and money, which are used for advertising purposes. But the treasure trove of demographic information in these studies is seldom used by the news department. A thoughtful analysis of such material—plus the mountains of similar data compiled by the Census Bureau, the Labor Department, and other agencies—can help editors understand the venues within which political opinions are being formed.

The press should also do more bottom-up reporting. Grassroots decisions begin just there, at the grass roots. Why not report them that way? Cover the venues in which the political conversations are likely to occur: civic clubs, lodges, union halls, church organizations, local political organizations, and coffee shops. Regular reporting that sweeps through these venues during an election year could provide a wealth of information about the mood and the interests of the voters. It could provide insights into whose ideas are changing and why. The same technology that allows campaigns to disappear into private space can be used to monitor their work there. But first we have to recognize that what makes elections interesting is what they say about the people, and here the press is moving profoundly in the wrong direction. ●

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November 2000

John Heilemann

The Whole Truth and Nothing But the Truth: The Untold Story of the Microsoft Antitrust Case

Wired, November 2000

[illegible] Heilemann looks beyond the conventional explanations of how and why Microsoft lost its anti[illegible] and companies. He examines the witnesses chosen by both sides, the court battles, Bill Gates' failure [illegible] and the [illegible] players who crossed the stage. Most of all, Heilemann shows us the pride and stubborness [illegible] a company run by a man who just didn't realize what he was up against.

Bonnie Hunt

Prescription for Errors

The Indianapolis Star, November 12-14, 2000

[illegible] Professions Bureau's delays in processing nurse suspension orders and its inconsistent [illegible] explores drug abuse among nurses and reveals that the head of Indiana's program to monitor nurses' [illegible] job.

Fox Butterfield

[illegible] One—A Special Report: Often, Parole is One Stop On the Way Back to Prison

The New York Times, November 29, 2000

[illegible] the potential "collateral damage" of the recent prison construction boom that while [illegible] deep cuts in parole supervision and certain rehabilitation programs. Butterfield [illegible] have come in California and follows the lives of several families that have been changed by the [illegible]

Nicholas Kulish and Jim VandeHei

GOP Protest in Miami-Dade is a Well-Organized Effort

The Wall Street Journal, November 27, 2000

[illegible] and Jim VandeHei document how the Bush campaign had to send the leaders of conservative Republican [illegible] from D.C. [illegible]

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The Last Angry Man

What happens when the Nation of Islam turns into a black version of the Promise Keepers?

By Ta-Nehisi Coates

On Monday, October 16, several hundred thousand people heeded the call of Nation of Islam leader Louis Farrakhan and assembled in the shadow of the Washington Monument to celebrate the Million Family March. The march was a sequel to Farrakhan's 1995 Million Man March, which had ranked as the largest civil-rights march on the nation's capital.

The Million Man March had proved that no public figure had his finger better placed on the pulse of black America than Louis Farrakhan. Using the rhetoric of the "endangered black male," Farrakhan created a historic gathering that appeared to be the beginning of a new popular movement. The march also propelled Farrakhan into the spotlight of respectability, and although his credibility had taken a few hits since then, hopes for the Million Family March still ran high.

The Million Family March was designed to expand on the themes he first outlined five years earlier and to include women, who had been excluded during the first go-around. But last year's event proved to be an altogether different kind of gathering. The Sunday before the Million Family March, Farrakhan prefaced his agenda on "Meet The Press," telling Tim Russert that it was time to "put God back in the center of our marriage ... and take responsibility as fathers to shepherd our families."

The following Monday would bring thousands of black families to the Mall, but the march would also showcase an amazing collection of oddballs united under Farrakhan's dubious banner. There was the record mogul Puff "Too Rich For You" Daddy; Jewel Howard Taylor, the wife of brutal Liberian dictator Charles Taylor; former Washington D.C. Mayor Marion Barry; and Rev. Sun Myung Moon, the ultra-conservative leader of the Unification Church, who helped bankroll the event.

Aided by the Rev. Moon, Farrakhan presided over a massive and lengthy group wedding and railed against pro-choicers, saying that the entire abortion dilemma could be solved if women didn't give themselves over to loathsome men. "Sisters, your womb is sacred," lectured Farrakhan. "You have the right to choose. Choose well the man you will give yourself to."

The image of Farrakhan lecturing black women about chastity while officiating a mass wedding was a strikingly different picture from the incendiary minister black America had grown accustomed to. For almost two decades, Farrakhan has served as black people's official middle finger to the Man. We knew that whatever our problems were with Farrakhan and the shaky foundation of his movement, we could always count on him to give American racism an uncompromising rebuke. That Farrakhan was an anti-Semite was irrelevant to us—we just couldn't figure out why he kept singling out Jews. To paraphrase James Baldwin and Chris Rock, we had a beef with all quarters of white America and saw little point in categorizing.

But at the Million Family March, Farrakhan subverted much of his usual anti-white rhetoric in favor of Liebermanesque calls for a return of God to the lives of Americans. Gone was the fiery condemnation of white racism, and in its place was a bizarre sort of multiculturalism. At its core, the Million Family March

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Ta-Nehisi Coates *writes frequently on race and African-American cultural issues.*

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turned out to be little more than a black version of the Promise Keepers that showcased one of the great chameleon acts of our time: Minister Louis Farrakhan morphing from the tireless voice of black angst into a vanilla social conservative.

That transformation did not happen in a vacuum, and the reasons behind it say as much about the change in the black community over the past decade as they do about Farrakhan. One thing is certain, though: While white America might celebrate Farrakhan's evolution, black America has suffered a real loss.

One Million Men

In 1995, you didn't need a deck of tarot cards to predict my attendance at the Million Man March. I was a student at what a friend calls "hysterically black" Howard University. Prone to long hours of pondering the works of Amiri Baraka, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Walter Rodney, I was young, naïve, and a quasi-black nationalist—all of which placed me squarely in Farrakhan's target audience.

But what no amount of occult mysticism could have predicted was that Farrakhan's call for the occupation of the Mall would reach beyond self-styled militants like me and touch all quarters of black maledom. Farrakhan's ability to, as rapper Chuck D says, "reach the bourgeois and rock the boulevard," was the clearest evidence that in 1995, no black leader seemed more on the brink of something big than Louis Farrakhan.

The first hints of this broad appeal became evident in the summer of 1995, when Farrakhan barnstormed across the nation drawing thousands into men-only meetings in major cities. The one I attended in my native Baltimore was all fist-pumping, black-male ego-maintenance work that must have raised the testosterone levels of the city tenfold. As we entered the venue where Farrakhan was to hold forth, the Fruit of Islam cheered us on and shouted encouragement.

Inside, Farrakhan's ministers buttered us up with sweet nothings that spoke to our sagging collective self-esteem. We were the "original man" they said, and the multitude of us was strong and beautiful. Moreover, they told us that Farrakhan was the only black leader in America who had the stones to speak to our pain. "You don't need no leader," said one minister, "who's gonna be approaching the white man, shucking and jiving, itching and scratching, shuffling and stepping!" It was all rhetoric and demagoguery, of course. But it was also a chance to forget the cabbies who passed us by and the security guards who followed us through shopping malls, and to feel for a few hours like decorated war heroes.

The need for an ego boost was only matched by the diversity of the crowd. There were balding businessmen still dapper in ties and jackets from the 9-to-5 world; homeboys from West Baltimore in Champion hoodies and baggy Guess jeans; and college kids like me, nationalist and otherwise, who'd come for a shot of confidence from the one man who could make us feel like everything was gonna be all right.

During the months before the Million Man March, the anticipation at my university could have sent a small satellite into orbit. Nation of Islam speakers came to campus spreading the good word, and Howard's student association declared its support. The night before the march, Howard students convened a rally that was roundly attended by men and women. The next day I connected with a few friends and three of my brothers and walked down to the Mall to witness the greatest post-civil rights gathering of black America to date.

Because black folks put a lot of stock in unity, the picture of hundreds of thousands of black men peacefully assembled was moving. We perceive ourselves as a perpetually fractured ethnic group and envy Asians, Jews, and white America. But on Oct. 16, 1995, no group looked more single-minded than black men. Public figures who in the past had had a rocky relationship with Farrakhan addressed the crowd—most notably Malcolm X's widow, Betty Shabazz. Lawyers, ex-convicts, fathers, parolees, and students all swarmed the Mall. We took particular pleasure in defying all the stereotypes by not coming to the Mall and wrecking shop. For black men, it was like being a turkey all your life and getting a chance to fly for a day.

It was also Farrakhan's opportunity to fly. For years he had been shunned by the establishment, black and white. He'd been rejected as a hate-filled anti-Semite and been slammed even by the nationalists for his suspected role in the death of Malcolm X. But Farrakhan would leave the march as the undisputed President of Afro-America. Even Jesse Jackson had been forced to play second fiddle to him, and the rest of the black moderates who had tried to steer clear of Farrakhan's Million Man train were instead tied to the tracks.

Stand and Fail to Deliver

From the moment Farrakhan took the podium at the Million Man March, though, it was clear that he was incapable of taking advantage of this opportunity to marshal the energy of his movement to create a powerful new political machine. He proved himself a bumbler immediately, asserting that African slaves had first arrived in the colonies in 1555. (African slaves first

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arrived in the colonies in 1619.)

Farrakhan then launched into a rambling speech most notable for its dabbling in numerology. Noting the Jefferson and Lincoln Memorials in the background, Farrakhan argued for their mystical significance: "Abraham Lincoln, the 16th president. Thomas Jefferson, the 3rd president, and 16 and 3 make 19 again," said Farrakhan. "What is so deep about this number 19? When you have a 9, you have a womb that is pregnant. And when you have a 1 standing by the 9, it means that there's something secret that has to be unfolded."

For almost two decades, Farrakhan has served as black people's official middle finger to the Man.

The speech proved to be only a precursor. Three months after the Million Man March, Farrakhan launched his "World Friendship Tour." Touted as a means for Farrakhan to take his message of atonement worldwide, the trip did little more than unite white conservatives and black intellectuals in condemnation of the tour. At the time Farrakhan visited Sudan, the country was under siege internationally for allowing its Muslim citizens to raid and enslave the country's black non-Muslim population. But Farrakhan came to Sudan and dismissed all charges of slavery and praised the "wise Islamic leadership" of dictator Hassan al-Turabi.

In Nigeria, Farrakhan compared notes with then-Nigerian big man Sani Abacha. The Muslim dictator had recently voided elections and brutally suppressed all opposition, jailing dissidents and hanging internationally renowned author Ken Saro-Wiwa. But when Farrakhan came to Nigeria, he reportedly said to Abacha, "They said you hanged one man. So what?"

The trip wasn't the only sign that Farrakhan's new attempts at respectability were, at best, conflicted and at worst, simply insincere. In August of 1996, in light of Farrakhan's new stature stemming from the Million Man March, the National Association of Black Journalists (NABJ)—never known as a hotbed of black militants—took the extremely bold step of inviting Farrakhan to address the group at their convention in Nashville. If NABJ expected praise from Farrakhan for giving a forum to the most despised black man in America, they were in for a rude awakening.

Farrakhan laid into the group with a fury that he usually reserved for the Anti-Defamation League. "White folks did not hire you to really represent what black people are thinking, and you don't really tell them what you think because you are too afraid," said Farrakhan according to the *Chicago Tribune*. "A scared-to-death Negro is a slave, you slave writers."

It was vintage Farrakhan, and everything he had managed to keep under wraps at the recent October march. A few of the journalists in the room applauded Farrakhan's comments, but many more were offended at how their guest speaker had so rudely wiped his muddy wingtips on their carpet. Farrakhan's verbal thrashing was to some extent true, but it did little to help his relationship with black journalists, and it raised questions about the sincerity of his attempts at inclusiveness.

Of course, Farrakhan's behavior really shouldn't have come as any surprise. He has long been a bundle of contradictions, as has the Nation of Islam itself. Contrary to its image as an independent organization, its members are virtually brainwashed to follow their leader and his lieutenants through hellfire. Despite their militant talk, rarely do these self-styled defenders of black people raise arms against their alleged oppressors. They are better known for acts of brutality against their own. Malcolm X's assassination is the best-known example of Nation of Islam "justice," but in 1973, for instance, members of the Nation also stormed the home of a Muslim rival and murdered seven members of the group.

A few months before the Million Man March, the Nation's business entities were investigated by the *Chicago Tribune*. The result was a damning series of articles that detailed a failed security operation, a clinic hawking a charlatan's cure for AIDS, and a trail of debt and unpaid black employees. The stories revealed that much of Farrakhan's talk of black economic self-empowerment was just that—talk—and that the organization that preached strict moral values was corrupt at the core.

Deep down, we've always known that Farrakhan was more style than substance, more opportunist than organizer. Yet despite these conflicting pictures, Farrakhan has maintained a unique hold on the black imagination—particularly in men—because of his

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unique ability to give voice to the unspoken emotions of large swaths of black America. The pleasure we took from Farrakhan's defiance has long allowed us to disregard many of his considerable shortcomings. But the desire for that defiance has slowly seeped out of the black community and, without it, Farrakhan's shortcomings have become impossible to ignore.

Image Is Everything

For decades, Farrakhan was able to capitalize on the long-gloomy prospects for black men and on their failure to succeed in the white man's America. Historically, the Nation has culled much of its membership not only from the poor, but also from Afro-America's untouchables—the pimps, prostitutes, and pushers. The sect's willingness to work with the black poor has given Farrakhan legitimacy among people that the NAACP has seemingly forgotten. In return, they have imbued him with a power few other black leaders could wield: the power to strike fear in the hearts of white people.

By championing those with nothing to lose, Farrakhan represented the unspoken threat of an ignored poor black America: the riots, violence, and mayhem of the late 1960s. With his disciplined troops in bow ties and fedoras, Farrakhan spoke to the collective emasculation felt by black men while hinting at what could happen if that rage was harnessed into something organized. His overt defiance of white authority also provided vicarious satisfaction for every repressed African American who wanted to tell white people to fuck off but couldn't afford to.

Consequently, Farrakhan's appeal has stretched beyond the public housing projects and deep into the heart of black America, even among those who don't necessarily agree with his politics or his anti-Semitism. Farrakhan has also cultivated an image as the one black leader who is not a puppet. While the traditionalists say, "If you can't beat 'em, join 'em," Farrakhan said, "If you can't beat 'em, then the hell with 'em."

It's an important distinction, because it is widely believed among African Americans that our leadership is in bed with the enemy. The vast majority of mainstream black leadership—the Urban League, the NAACP, SCLC—traces its lineage to the integrationists of yesteryear. Clearly, those integrationists won some important civil rights victories, but inherent to integration is the idea that if black people don't become a part of white America, we are finished. Understandably, many African Americans are uneasy about a brain trust whose strategy—and financing—essentially begins and ends with a dependency on white people, many of whom have historically never liked us much.

Whereas the NAACP and most of traditional black leadership has been funded by the benevolence of white liberals, the Nation of Islam—Moammar al-Quadafi aside—is funded by its own devices. That includes numerous business entities that stretch across the country, such as bakeries, restaurants, a national weekly newspaper, and private security firms. For African Americans, Farrakhan's financial empire has been proof—or at least the illusion of proof—that the dream of true economic independence can be achieved on our own.

Yet over the past decade, a very real change has occurred in black America, which even by 1995 had gone a long way towards lessening the appeal of Farrakhan's traditional rhetoric.

According to the Census Bureau, in 1998, poverty was at its lowest level ever for African Americans. Just between 1998 and 1999, the number of poor African Americans dropped by 700,000. In 1997, the African-American median income reached an all-time high, and nearly one-third of African-American families reported incomes of $50,000 or more. Black entrepreneur Robert Johnson just announced he was selling his Black Entertainment Television for $3 billion—a far vaster sum than anything the Nation of Islam ever conjured up.

Other forces have conspired to undermine the Nation of Islam's attractiveness. In 1970, barely half of all black Americans between the ages of 25 and 29 had finished four years of high school. Today, almost 90 percent have—a number almost equal to that of whites. And while in 1970, Farrakhan would have found barely half a million potential recruits in college, by the year of the Million Man March, there were upwards of 14 million black college students across the country.

Farrakhan's rhetoric might have held some appeal for those left behind—specifically the poor single mother in the inner city—except that welfare reform has co-opted his message of self-reliance and economic independence. Thousands of poor black women have been forced into economic independence—whether they like it or not. With jobs aplenty, the booming economy has also defused some of the racial tension between blacks and whites at the bottom of the economic scale where Farrakhan's message has traditionally held the most appeal.

In his quest to keep the Nation viable through such radical social change, Farrakhan has had to diversify the Nation's membership. As a result, rather than public housing complexes and prisons, colleges are

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now perhaps Farrakhan's most fertile recruiting grounds. He has also attempted to modulate his tone to establish legitimacy among orthodox Muslims who consider part of the Nation's doctrine heresy. (The Nation's creation mythology claims that white people were created by a mad black scientist named Yakub.) And Farrakhan has toned down some of his anti-whitey rhetoric to appeal to the growing black middle class, which, happily or not, is coexisting with and even prospering among whites.

The Million Man March initially suggested that in his twilight years, Farrakhan was following in the footsteps of Malcolm X and moving away from blind condemnations of whites to a more complex political analysis that might turn the Nation into a formidable black political organization. But five years later, the Million Family March proved that where Malcolm's ideological turn brought him to Pan-Africanism and even flirtations with socialism, Farrakhan's evolution has brought him to the Moonies.

Million Family Milieu

Farrakhan's social conservatism isn't really new. At the core of the Million Man March was a muted endorsement of patriarchy and a blame-the-victim mentality that told black men to atone, as opposed to demanding that America atone to black people. Black radicals, and the black community at large, always excused Farrakhan's conservatism in exchange for his unique willingness to consistently flip off white America.

Despite Farrakhan's historical defiance of white America and polite black America, though, clearly there is also a part of him that craves its acceptance. For instance, when Joe Lieberman hinted at a possible meeting with Farrakhan, his remarks were covered thoroughly in *The Final Call*, the Nation's official mouthpiece. According to Arthur Magida, author of *Prophet of Rage: A Life of Louis Farrakhan and His Nation*, such a meeting would have been high on Farrakhan's wish list.

That craving for acceptance seems to have grown since Farrakhan's recent bout of prostate cancer, which has him looking towards his place in the history books. It also helps explain his recent makeover. Ever the opportunist, when pissing off white people stopped paying dividends for Farrakhan, he changed his message.

Rather than attacking the Man these days, Farrakhan saves much of his invective for his own people, blaming black women for choosing men who ain't right with God; he attacks black men for not being proper heads of the household. These days you could tweak a typical Farrakhan speech for its color references and it would sound just as natural coming from the likes of William Bennett.

Much to my surprise, though, Farrakhan has found a receptive audience, as this fall's Million Family March demonstrated. The march was "a major decline from what [Farrakhan] was able to pull off five years ago," says Magida. "But even with that in mind, the turnout was still reasonably impressive. No other black leader could have issued a call for the Million Man March, and even five years later, outside of Farrakhan, there still isn't one that could get 40,000 to 50,000 people on the Mall."

The Million Family March, however strange its bedfellows, proved once again that Farrakhan does have his ear to the ground of black America. As his traditional power base has slipped away, he seems to have capitalized on the unappreciated fact that the black community is not necessarily more liberal than the white one—especially as it gets richer. A lot of blacks would be Republicans if the party weren't seen as inherently racist. Farrakhan seems to be offering conservative blacks a palatable alternative to the Christian Coalition.

I suspect another reason for Farrakhan's contin-

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ued appeal is that despite this state of African-American abundance, there is still a widespread sense that black America has lost its semblance of community. In the eyes of many African Americans, there are still too many unwed mothers, too many grandmothers raising kids, and too many black kids who only go to church for funerals.

Farrakhan has found a cause in black America's nostalgia. Indeed, his orchestration of a black mass wedding may have been more brilliant than he's been given credit for. Consider that in 1960, 79 percent of black men between the age of 30 and 34 were married. By 1994, the percentage had dropped to 33. Meanwhile, the number of black women between 15 and 44 who have never been married has skyrocketed to 56 percent from 28 percent over the same period. Those figures make the mass wedding an especially potent symbol.

For black men, the Million Man March was like being a turkey all your life and getting a chance to fly for a day.

There's nothing inherently wrong with preaching the value of marriage and family, except that it isn't especially unique. Black America doesn't really need Farrakhan to condemn it for moral failings; white America has been doing that quite well for years. More importantly, Farrakhan's conversion from black radical to social conservative has rendered him ordinary.

It's a sad turn of events, because there is still a need for someone like the old Farrakhan—an impolite African-American leader who makes white people uncomfortable, gets under their skin by telling unpleasant truths, and refuses to let them ignore the effects of their racism. In spite of all the gains African Americans have made in the past few decades, systemic racism is still waging war on the black community, even if black people choose not to see it. Nowhere is this more evident than in the criminal justice arena.

During George W. Bush's crusade to the White House, Bush was able to boast of his record of executing people in the state of Texas. Despite the fact that the death penalty's application is fraught with race, Bush's flippant remarks during the presidential debate went largely unchallenged by the country's black leadership. Farrakhan was silent on the issue—even as his own state, Illinois, was proving to be a breeding ground for errors in capital punishment cases, and it eventually rejected the whole procedure.

Ditto on the drug war. A recent study by Human Rights Watch found that blacks made up 62 percent of the nation's drug offenders. The study estimated that in the state of Illinois, for every white person that goes to prison on a drug conviction, 57 African Americans go first. In Alabama, because of the nexus between criminal justice and voting rights, nearly one-third of all black males can't vote.

Criminal justice is one the last vestiges of the sort of overt racism that Nation of Islam leaders have always railed against. But with Farrakhan busy kowtowing to Lieberman, there is no longer a national figure of any prominence who can confront those issues and give voice to the still-simmering rage of black men.

Without someone like Farrakhan on the fringes willing to fight power with power, even moderate black leaders may find themselves handicapped. Like Marcus Garvey and Malcolm X before him, Farrakhan's mere presence on the political scene gave leaders like Jesse Jackson or Julian Bond a stronger bargaining position: Deal with us or you'll have Farrakhan to reckon with, was often their implicit message. Now, though, the threat of unleashing Farrakhan and his Moonie-esque minions isn't likely to leave many on Capitol Hill shaking in their boots.

Farrakhan's charisma is clearly still intact, as demonstrated by his ability to draw tens of thousands of people to the Mall, but I wonder, to what end? When his constituents were a small but potent group of angry black men with nothing to lose, Farrakhan provided a formidable black counterweight to white supremacy. But now, Farrakhan looks as harmless as, well, Rev. Moon. His group may have more followers this way, but the defanged Nation of Islam is an irrelevant Nation of Islam.

For those of us who found dignity in his defiant stance, even conceding his faults Farrakhan's metamorphosis into a black Jerry Falwell is regrettable. Ultimately it means the death of black America's last angry man. ●

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Beef Wars

Is the USDA's E. coli policy undercooked?

BY WINKLER WEINBERG AND TED GELTNER

ONE EARLY MORNING IN AUGUST 1998, Frank Bauer arrived at his Ocala, Florida meat packing plant to find some 30 government agents from the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) scouring every corner of the family-owned company. Investigators seized all the office computers and documents, and all the company's meat was considered "government evidence," according to a search warrant.

Bauer Meat was an unlikely target for such a huge government raid. The 50-year-old company had faithfully followed all current government regulations, monitored by two on-site USDA inspectors, and it had never been cited for violations of meat handling regulations. In the mid-'70s, Frank Bauer had actually made national headlines for exposing corruption among government meat inspectors.

But two months earlier in Atlanta, an outbreak of illness from the deadly bacteria *E. coli* O157:H7 was indirectly linked to beef sold by Bauer Meats, and the USDA was hell-bent on a crackdown. After the raid, the USDA informed Bauer that it was withdrawing its two inspectors from his plant. Without inspectors, a plant cannot legally sell food in interstate commerce. The move essentially shut down the Bauer Meat Company. After receiving the news, Frank Bauer retreated to the ranch where he kept his prized Angus herd. He placed his own 40 mm semiautomatic handgun to his right temple and pulled the trigger.

Despite its tragic ending, the USDA's move to close Bauer Meats represented a victory for food-safety activists. Ever since the famous 1993 Jack-in-the-Box debacle, in which burgers contaminated with *E. coli* O157:H7 sickened 732 people and killed four children, activists have been demanding greater action from the government to prevent food-born illnesses.

But the events leading up to Frank Bauer's suicide illustrate how consumer activists' well-intentioned demands for safer food have driven the USDA to take extreme measures that punish business but do little to actually improve the safety of the food supply. The USDA's "zero tolerance" policy for policing the American beef supply for *E. coli* ignores basic science, and it has led the agency to recall millions of pounds of beef and shutter dozens of plants while neglecting the effective—and sometimes simple—measures that it can take to protect public health.

The Other White Water

Bauer's tragic story started a few months earlier, back in Georgia. On June 11, 1998, the temperature in Atlanta was over 90 degrees, but the chlorine reading taken from "Captain Kid's Cove" pool at Atlanta's White Water Park was as low as the instrument would measure. The pool's chlorinator was on the fritz, and several parents would report later that they had seen signs of fecal matter in the pool and on a water slide.

Five days later, six Atlanta metro-area children, including the son of Atlanta Braves baseball player Walt Weiss, were hospitalized, suffering from kidney failure, bloody diarrhea, and other symptoms of a deadly *E. coli* 0157:H7 infection. The bacteria are usually spread to

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humans through undercooked beef and other food sources, but fecal matter is also a common vector. In all, 26 cases of *E. coli* O157:H7 would be traced to the water park. One two-year-old girl would die and another toddler would remain in a coma for months to come. (Full disclosure: Dr. Weinberg served briefly as a scientific consultant to White Water Park's owners.)

The *E. coli* outbreak became a national story, driven by public interest organizations, such as Safe Tables Our Priority (STOP), and panicked parents who demanded government action. Bill Marler, a renowned food-safety lawyer who had won record judgments against Jack-in-the-Box, showed up in Atlanta ready to sign up clients. As part of the investigation, health officials performed a rapid "DNA fingerprinting" to try to identify the source of the infection.

The bacteria were initially tied to a beef lot that had sickened 11-year-old Stephen Tyler Roberts, who had nearly died from kidney failure after eating an undercooked hamburger in the cafeteria of Danielsville Elementary School in North Georgia two months earlier. The beef had come from the Bauer Meat Company. After Roberts' illness was reported to state health officials, Bauer had voluntarily recalled 37,500 pounds of beef—its first recall ever.

No other illnesses were directly ascribed to the lot of beef, and health investigators were reluctant to blame Bauer for the water-park outbreak because of some ambiguity in the lab tests, but the press had no such qualms. It wasn't long before reporters were holding Bauer Meat responsible for killing children. Consumer activists and members of STOP were furious that health officials had not warned parents earlier about the possible burger link.

"They've given them a false sense of security," Nancy Donley told the *Atlanta Journal and Constitution*. Donley, whose 6-year-old son died of *E. coli* poisoning in 1993, complained that public health officials were more interested in protecting a meat manufacturer and the water park than in protecting the public. The news clips found their way into the hands of the USDA. Under relentless criticism to do something about the *E. coli* threat, the USDA staged a midnight raid on Bauer Meat a few weeks later.

The raid, however, was premature. Dr. Paul Blake, an epidemiologist with the Georgia Division of Public Health who was involved in the investigation of the White Water Park outbreak, could identify no one from the Danielsville Elementary School who visited White Water Park during the transmission period. For this reason, he became unsatisfied with the lab work on the White Water *E. coli* isolates that had been the basis for the Bauer Meat raid. Blake shipped all of the isolates, each with a randomly assigned code number, to Dr. Mansour Samadpour at the University of Washington.

Samadpour performed a much more sensitive test on the bacteria, and the data showed no link at all between the *E. coli* from the recalled Bauer beef and that from White Water Park. Unfortunately, the finding came too late to save Frank Bauer.

Recalling Jack-in-the-Box

It's easy to understand why *E. coli* scares people. The resilient bacterium can double itself every 20 minutes; manufacture a deadly toxin while growing within the human gut; shut down kidneys; puncture the intestines; cause seizures, comas, and, eventually, death. Children are the most common victims of the microbe which can arrive innocently packaged in the contents of a school lunch cheeseburger.

That's why, after the 1993 Jack-in-the-Box cata-

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strophe in Seattle, parents of the young victims created the lobbying group STOP to force the government to clean up the beef industry. The group wielded tremendous political clout with their tragic stories; no government official wanted to be seen as sympathizing with food suppliers who killed innocent children.

A year later, the USDA declared *E. coli* O157:H7 an adulterant in raw ground beef under the Federal Meat Inspection Act. Lots identified as containing the organism would have their meat recalled. A sampling program was initiated to test for the organism in beef prepared in federally-inspected plants and in retail stores. The agency would at least withhold its mark of inspection if any bacteria were detected, and it had the discretion to withdraw inspection if it felt the adulteration was severe.

Despite the explosion in the number of beef recalls, *E. coli* O157:H7 remains in the nation's food supply.

In the first year of the program, the USDA's Food Safety Inspection Service (FSIS) temporarily suspended operations at 20 plants and moved to shut one other. By 1998, the year of the White Water outbreak, recalls were a regular part of FSIS operation. That year, the Bauer Meat recall was one of 44 originated by the agency, totaling 46,030,470 pounds of meat. Last year, the figure was up to 62 recalls.

The record for annual meat recalls was set in 1997, when FSIS recalled 25 million pounds of ground beef—enough to make one hundred million quarter-pound burgers. The episode began the night of July 9 in the home of a 22-year-old Safeway employee from Pueblo, Colorado. He hosted a barbecue for two friends and ate two burgers. Within a week he had a confirmed case of *E. coli* O157:H7 infection. The lot was traced to the Columbus, Nebraska plant of Hudson Foods, a large meat-packing operation. More than a dozen people fell ill from the tainted meat, and the USDA demanded the huge recall.

But, despite the explosion in the number of recalls, the bacterium remains in the nation's food supply. There are 25,000 cases of *E. coli* O157:H7 infection each year in the U.S.—a number that has not gone down in relation to the increased enforcement by the USDA. The CDC reports that the rate of O157 cases in the country has not really budged:

Year:	1996	1997	1998	1999
Cases*:	2.7	2.3	2.8	2.1

*(per 100,000 persons)

The numbers shouldn't come as much of a surprise. As much as the government would like to be able to tell the public and food activists that it can eradicate *E. coli* from the food supply, it is well aware that it can not. That's what makes Frank Bauer's death all the more tragic.

The Jungle

Even if Bauer's operation had been perfectly clean, *E. coli* would still come right in one door of the plant and back out another. *E. coli*'s normal habitat is in the intestines of mammals, and for O157:H7, it is in the intestines of cattle. It is also found on the hides of the animals, which often become caked with manure (hence the recent *E. coli* outbreak stemming from the Pennsylvania petting zoo). If mistakes are made in the processing of cattle, the bacteria can end up on the meat at the time of slaughter.

As the entrails of the animal are dislodged, microscopic spray may contaminate the product. With some slaughterhouses processing five hundred steers per hour, there is ample opportunity for cross-contamination. It is even more difficult to keep a contaminated hide from adulterating the meat as a large animal's skin is peeled off.

Bauer did not run a slaughterhouse. He received carcasses from the Central Beef Corporation and from other abattoirs. If *E. coli* contaminated the caracasses, this occurred before they arrived at Bauer Meat. When Bauer sent a sirloin cut to his grinding machine, even the USDA wouldn't be able to tell whether he was putting bacteria into the hopper along with the beef. Indeed, Bauer had two on-site inspectors at the plant when it packed up the burgers for Tyler Roberts' school lunch. Closing down Bauer's plant, in effect, was nothing more than a PR stunt, not good public-health policy.

Dr. James Jay, a widely recognized expert in the field of food microbiology and safety and professor emeritus at the University of Nevada, sees the massive beef recalls and plant closings like Bauer's as "a virtual disaster and a misuse of the scientific discipline of microbiology."

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According to Jay, "There's not much science in the zero-tolerance policy. In fact, it was instituted to appease consumer activists. There is no test that can produce results within minutes to show whether bacteria are present on a carcass. So what does it mean if you find a positive? Does it mean other carcasses have the same bacteria? No. Does a negative finding mean none of the other carcasses have *E. coli*? No, it does not."

E. coli O157:H7 can double itself every 20 minutes; manufacture a deadly toxin while growing within the human gut; shut down kidneys; puncture the intestines; cause seizures, comas, and eventually death.

That doesn't mean, of course, that the government should just abandon testing. It should mandate rigorous testing all along the beef production line for any number of hazards, not just *E. coli*. According to FSIS spokeswoman Carol Blake, the agency does do some generic *E. coli* testing at the slaughterhouse level, and it encourages plants to set up controls and requirements for their suppliers. "A processing plant certainly has the right to require its supplier to do testing prior to receiving the product," she said. "They can implement some controls to give them an additional safeguard."

The problem, of course, is just as FSIS has been unable to prevent *E. coli* from finding its way into the supply, so have the suppliers and the processing plants. And it's not because FSIS hasn't tried.

The USDA began a new testing system in 1998 designed to improve on the old "poke and sniff" method of meat inspection. Known as HACCP (Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Points), the system is designed to force meat companies to monitor bacteria levels in their plants and to keep contaminated products from reaching the public. HACCP is credited with reducing the incidence of salmonella in ground beef from 7.5 percent in 1996 to 5 percent last year—clear evidence of the value of better regulation. Unfortunately, there has been no such reduction in *E. coli*.

The reason lies partly with the bacterium itself. *E. coli* O157:H7, unlike salmonella, is highly toxic in tiny doses. Consuming fewer than 10 *E. coli* O157:H7 bacteria can make people deathly ill; by comparison, you would have to eat 1,000 salmonella bacteria before getting sick. Essentially, to achieve zero tolerance, meat producers would have to culture every piece of beef and hold it for a couple of days until the test results came back to ensure that meat leaving the plant were clean. Such a system would be wildly expensive, not to mention inefficient, and even then, it still wouldn't be foolproof.

Burgers Well Done

The scientific problems that plague the government's *E. coli* policy haven't stopped consumer activists from demanding more plant closings and legislation empowering the USDA to conduct mandatory recalls (the current recalls are voluntary) and impose civil fines on companies that distribute tainted meat. And the government should have strong enforcement power to shut down dirty plants and slaughterhouses and it should exercise it fairly. But again, even those measures won't completely banish the deadly *E. coli* bacteria from beef.

According to Dr. Mike Doyle, director of the Center for Food Safety and Quality Enhancement at the University of Georgia, eliminating *E. coli* from beef can only be done "post-processing," or after cows have been turned into hamburger patties and steaks. One possible post-processing solution is irradiation, which is the only known method to eliminate *E. coli* in raw meat.

Irradiation has already been employed in 39 countries, and in December 1999 the USDA finally approved rules for meat irradiation in the United States. Health and safety authorities had already approved irradiation for some 40 different foods, ranging from spices to grains, chicken, fruits, and vegetables. Even apple juice and chewing tobacco are candidates for radiation treatment. But for ground beef, irradiation may not be the silver bullet some would hope for.

"Irradiation sounds good when you say it fast," says Doyle, "but the right way to do it is not at all clear." The biggest hurdle for irradiation, according to Doyle, is that flavor may be altered. After large doses of radiation, ground beef can take on the smell

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of a wet dog. Very high doses may also denature the myoglobin in the meat, rendering it pale and less attractive at the market.

The beef industry is currently studying other strategies for combating *E. coli* at the slaughterhouse level. These include steaming beef carcasses at 160 degrees before processing, organic acid washes, and different methods of removing entrails. If those measures prove effective, they should be adopted immediately. But it's likely those options won't be in widespread use for some time and, like testing, they aren't foolproof: The bacterium can hide in the miniscule crevices that steam and acid can miss.

With such imperfect options for controlling *E. coli*, the most rational choice to avoid getting sick from beef might be to quit eating it. But red meat lovers shouldn't despair. There are some other, simple ways to eliminate the majority of cases of *E. coli* infection almost immediately.

The spread of *E. coli* infection almost always involves human error in food preparation. Nearly every case of *E. coli* poisoning involving beef, from Jack-in-the-Box to the Danielsville Elementary School cafeteria to the Safeway employee in Colorado, stemmed from improperly cooked meat. At the time of the Jack-in-the-Box outbreak, the company was using the lowest acceptable standard in the industry for cooking its burgers: 140 degrees. Some reports indicated that sometimes burgers cooked at only 108 degrees in the center were making their way across the counter.

Food and consumer activists hate this kind of analysis, which places some responsibility on the people who prepare food, rather than the beef suppliers themselves. They believe it relieves the government and industry of responsibility for monitoring the food supply. Those criticisms have some merit, but food safety doesn't have to be an either/or proposition.

Unquestionably, the packing industry and the slaughterhouses should be taken to task to ensure that they are doing everything in their power to make sure that meat is contaminant-free. The government should also strictly inspect the beef industry at every level and take reasonable and fair steps to maintain the safety of the food supply—including punishing those companies who fail to live up to government standards. However, activists should not minimize the real value of public education. That's because, unlike recalls or plant closings, teaching people to cook their burgers until well-done is actually proven to reduce disease. Just ask the people at McDonald's.

While the Jack-in-the-Box outbreak is the most famous *E. coli* story, it wasn't the first time that numerous people had gotten sick from eating undercooked burgers. That honor goes to Mickey D's, which was responsible for the first *E. coli* O157:H7 outbreak ever, in 1982.

This initial outbreak didn't get much play in the newspapers—mostly because the day the news broke about this new scourge, headlines coincidentally read: "Tylenol Laced with Cyanide: Seven Dead in Chicago." Still, the incident prompted McDonald's to start frying hamburgers to a bacteria-curdling 155 degrees, and they have had few problems since then.

A few other simple precautions could produce measurable results in public health. A 1997 CDC study found that *E. coli* cases could be reduced by a whopping 34 percent with adequate hand washing by food preparers. With 25,000 cases per year, that's a significant reduction in *E. coli* poisoning. Add to that the use of adequate cooking temperatures and pool chlorination, and you've gone a long way toward solving the problem.

Yet the amount of time and resources the USDA uses to educate the public on these simple facts is just a drop in the bucket compared to the resources applied to its huge recall and closure program. Of course, educating the public about proper food handling isn't especially glamorous. Unlike millions of pounds of recalled beef, public service announcements don't give the USDA much to point to when kids are getting sick and their parents are demanding action. And it certainly doesn't win big budget increases from Congress. But until science catches up with our demands for safer food, education is the best weapon we've got. ●

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Political Booknotes

Personal History

By Juan Williams

At its best, history is full of passion, grit, stupidity, and violence. But historians typically tell heroic stories of people with titles—the presidents and the generals—who face their fates with determination and even wisdom. And the history is true, no doubt, if the historian is a good researcher. But even at its best, that official history is no match for history as lived by people without titles.

So while every movie goer loves a simple tale of heroes triumphing against the odds, there is a deeper level to real history, where sex, hate, and even insanity among the anonymous public gives the truest feeling of what happened. At the dawn of the 21st century, such honest history of the civil rights movement is in short supply. The movement has been reduced to a morality play with an ample supply of pure heroes and pure villains. Martin Luther King, Jr., for example, is now a hero who seems to have been born with his name on a major street that cuts through the black section of every town. And Birmingham Police Chief "Bull" Connor is now so reviled for his attacks on civil rights demonstrators that he has become the perfect representation of evil. Connor is now so bad that even his first name, Theophilus, is lost. (Did you really think that his mother named him "Bull?")

There is hard truth to be found in the defining moments of history that produced the essence of King's heroism and Connor's villainy. But both have now been inflated beyond recognition into one-dimensional characters. Any curious mind knows a far more complex story is being hidden. And if you truly care about the most bloody and bizarre puzzle in American history—race relations—then a bothersome thought may tease at your soul. What if American society is telling itself these infantile stories about and the civil rights movement to stop discussion of the more difficult, complex truth about race in this nation?

The perfect antidote to any childish version of civil rights history is now available in a compelling new book edited by Jon Meacham. He has collected essays and book excerpts about the personal experience of race in America during the middle and end of the 20th century. Meacham's selections include works done by writers such as James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison, William Faulkner, and Walker Percy.

VOICES IN OUR BLOOD: America's Best on the Civil Rights Movement
Edited by Jon Meacham
Random House. $29.95

And since Meacham is a journalist (*Newsweek*'s managing editor) he includes the works of his personal heroes—older journalists with a keen eye for the characters, ironies, and the outright deceptions of race relations in American life. The journalists are mostly white. They include Murray Kempton, David Halberstam, Garry Wills, and Howell Raines. The black journalists in the collection, such as Carl Rowan and Alex Haley, are featured for work they did in white publications. The work of black journalists in black newspapers and magazines—a major source of civil rights coverage before the '60s—is notably absent.

But at every turn in Meacham's book, his personal struggle to embrace his white Southern heritage (of recent vintage, since he was born in 1969) comes through the pages. Here are stories and news reports about real people exposing real fear, real prejudice, as well as real bravery and honesty, as they deal with racial situations.

One of my favorite examples of the passionate honesty in this book comes in a piece by a man who, like Meacham, was a son of the South but spent time in the best Northern salons. In "North Towards Home," a 1967 piece written by Willie Morris, the Mississippi writer who was later the editor of *Harper's*, Morris describes his young white male experience of black women.

"I knew all about the sexual act," Morris wrote, "but not until I was twelve years old did I know it was performed with white women for pleasure; I had thought only Negro women engaged in the act of love with white men just for fun, because they were the only ones with the animal desire to submit that way. So Negro girls and women were a source of constant excitement and sexual feelings for me and filled my daydreams with delight and wonder."

Now that's one man being intensely honest about the sexual aspect of racial politics—and there are so many layers to it that provide a valuable window into the white view of race relations.

Similarly, Meacham selects a piece by James Baldwin from *Notes of a Native Son* that reveals the black side of the intimate, twisted perceptions of race. As a child, Baldwin had a white teacher who was thrilled with a small play he scripted when Baldwin was 10 years old. The teacher wanted to take him to a professional theater presentation to encourage his interest in writing. But that trip required breaking his father's prohibition against going to the theater. Baldwin had a plan, however. Even as a child he sensed that the white female teacher had the power to intimidate his father. And he was right. When the teacher came to the house and announced she was taking little James on an educational trip, the senior Baldwin bit his tongue and got out of the way. But later, the father warned the little boy that he would find out that white people are never friends with blacks and will "do anything to keep a Negro down."

Note that both of these pieces are done by writers with training as essayists who are writing from personal experience. Similarly, the novelists in this collection, from Maya Angelou to Alice Walker, are effective at evoking the reality of American race relations when they take the reader inside the intimate relations between black and white. Angelou's writings on how poor whites belittled her uncle, even though he owned the local store, and mocked her kind-hearted grandmother, feel as real and hot as a summer day in the Southland. Acting as a maestro for an orchestra of gifted writers, Meacham succeeds at transporting the reader to the confused heart of American race relations, down to the core of the misunderstandings, the invitations to hate and the violence.

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Journalists in Meacham's collection can only stand on the sideline and report. Their problem is that they are forced to write in the third person. And while some of their journalistic insights are rich, they are overmatched by even the weakest personal story.

The title of this book, *Voices in Our Blood*, suggests that Meacham is after those stories that are so personal that they are not measured by any universal standard of truth but by naked honesty. The book's title comes from a line in Robert Penn Warren's book, *Segregation: The Inner Conflict in the South*. Warren wrote that when he went south in 1956 to look at the nation's racial crisis, he was going to "hear the voices, to hear, in fact, the voices in my blood." No outside observer can capture what boils in your blood. It is personal, often unsaid for fear of embarrassment. This is the essence of race relations, and it is also the true heart of this valuable collection of writings.

JUAN WILLIAMS *is the host of National Public Radio's "Talk of the Nation" and author of* Thurgood Marshall: American Revolutionary.

Techno-tribalists

By Paul M. Barrett

CASS SUNSTEIN WOULD PREFER that we define the higher purposes of free speech in a digital-age republic based on the aspirations of Louis Brandeis, rather than those of Bill Gates.

The playful comparison is, of course, unfair to the Microsoft chairman, whom nobody, perhaps other than Gates himself, would consider a serious political or social thinker—let alone one on the level of Justice Brandeis. Still, the contrast helps clarify how online technology may bolster or corrode democracy. And to even the sides a bit, Sunstein suggests that Gates has an ally in Oliver Wendell Holmes, no less.

In 214 very small pages, Sunstein persuasively warns that the Internet's capacity to serve up only what users order in advance could debilitate the clash of ideas critical to informed self-government. A remarkably prolific constitutional scholar at the University of Chicago, Sunstein has made a life's work of proposing and refining pragmatic liberal policies he contends will strengthen "deliberative democracy." This book will disappoint readers hoping for fully conceived solutions to the problems he identifies in the cyberworld. But his provocative admonition to beware absolutist defenses of free speech online deserves attention, especially as the federal government continues to consider how to regulate the Internet.

REPUBLIC.COM
by Cass R. Sunstein
Princeton University Press, $19.95

To get things started, Sunstein offers several versions of the function that communication ought to play in society. Gates heralds a digital age in which the highest purpose of Internet communication is quickly satisfying consumers' customized desires. Getting exactly what you want—be it pet food, political news, video games, financial services, movies, medical information or chat room conversation—makes for a fulfilled life, according to this view. Gates dreams of a day when you can settle into the living room couch and tell your Internet-connected television, "I'm never interested in this, but I am particularly interested in that." The screen will select only the entertainment or purchasing opportunities you already know you want. Surfing channels? A waste of time. Don't even ask about newspapers or magazines. Traditional publications that offer readers a range of subject matter and opinions have no place in the Gatesian future. "For your own daily dose of news, you might subscribe to several review services and let a software agent or a human one pick and choose from them to compile your completely customized 'newspaper,'" Gates wrote in 1995. "These subscription services, whether human or electronic, will gather information that conforms to a particular philosophy and set of interests."

Sunstein mourns how close we are to achieving Gates' dream. Internet services already allow millions of users to filter out all they find distracting so they can focus exclusively on their personalized slice of reality. The network-television news, the general-interest newspaper, and the weekly newsmagazine are decreasingly people's primary sources of information in the Internet era. These institutions, with all their flaws, at least created the possibility that citizens would encounter reports of unexpected views, unfamiliar events, and experiences different from their own, Sunstein argues. In place of the metaphoric newsstand, where engaged citizens have to buy bundles of varied information, he maintains, the Internet offers a virtual shopping mall, where consumers are urged to acquire only the data they know they want. Communication online promotes mere "consumer sovereignty," as opposed to popular political sovereignty, which ought to be the core value of free expression protected by the First Amendment, Sunstein asserts.

The author notes that in discussions of free speech, Bill Gates and other con-

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sumer-sovereignty advocates actually walk in the footsteps of the great Justice Holmes. In his famous dissenting opinions defending free speech in the early part of the twentieth century, Holmes depicted expression as part of a political market. "Free trade in ideas," Holmes wrote, would allow truth to emerge.

Sunstein finds the Holmesian view lacking in its assumption that the invisible hand alone will reveal what people need to know to govern themselves. You have to go out and actively look for the truth, and sometimes you may not know what you're looking for, the professor suggests. Justice Brandeis, who often joined Holmes in defending political dissent, nevertheless spoke in quite different terms, Sunstein observes. Eschewing the marketplace metaphor, Brandeis insisted that debate of public issues is not only a right, but "a political duty"—a notion foreign to Holmes. "The greatest menace to freedom is an inert people," according to Brandeis. He saw "self-government as something dramatically different from an exercise in consumer sovereignty," Sunstein writes approvingly. "This does not mean that people have to be thinking about public affairs all or most of the time. But it does mean that each of us has rights and duties as citizens, not simply as consumers."

The Internet, to be sure, encourages dissemination of ideas, and and the Web's get-only-what-you-want mentality may work for selling books or cosmetics. But when this mindset shapes communication about public issues, the Internet encourages users to consume only opinions and information with which they are comfortable: Gun foes go to antigun Web sites; gun fans, to National Rifle Association sites. Feminists talk to feminists; right-to-lifers, to right-to-lifers.

Sunstein presents fascinating empirical research on how few Web sites provide links to sites of contrasting views. Instead, Internet partisans tend to collect and regurgitate "facts" from likeminded partisans, contributing to what Sunstein calls "cybercascades" of dubious information. One such cascade has helped fuel the widespread belief that abandoned hazardous-waste dumps rank among the worst environmental problems, the author writes. In fact, hard science doesn't support that conclusion. Another cascade has strengthened the fallacious and dangerous belief that HIV doesn't cause AIDS. Hate groups, some violent, have embraced the Internet as an efficient means to rally troops against racial minorities, Jews, homosexuals, and abortion providers.

We have always been able to seek out those who share our assumptions and ignore ideas we don't like. But the Internet's ability to filter information instantaneously makes the sifting process so much more effective that we are in danger of transforming ourselves into a society of egocentric techno-tribalists, Sunstein warns. Healthy democracy depends on citizens sharing experiences and exposing themselves to topics and ideas they wouldn't have chosen in advance. Lord knows, as a former staff member of this magazine and a loyal longtime employee of a dinosaur newspaper, I agree with Sunstein. So, what are we to do about all this?

The author admits that he doesn't really have an elaborate answer. His highly tentative suggestions include government subsidies for a Web analogue to the taxpayer-supported Public Broadcasting Service. He also backs the establishment, perhaps with government support, of Web sites where people of diverse views could discuss the issues of the day. Without favoring particular political content, government could require public-affairs Web sites to carry links to other sites offering contrasting views, Sunstein suggests.

Anticipating inevitable protests that government shouldn't regulate or otherwise get involved in the Internet, Sunstein skillfully illustrates that the government already regulates the Internet in numerous ways. The Federal Bureau of Investigation enforces anti-hacking laws, and the federal courts protect site owners' property by upholding copyright statutes, to name just two examples. The debate, Sunstein argues, should be over how government ought to regulate the Internet, not whether any regulation is permissible.

All of this sounds right to me. But I fear that even if absolutist First Amendment attacks on Internet regulation were overcome, Sunstein's innovations would attract the attention of an audience no larger than that which still reads high-quality newspapers, subscribes to magazines like *The Washington Monthly*, and watches PBS programs. Maybe that would be an impressive accomplishment: to transfer the existing, although shrinking, constituency for serious discussion of public affairs from the old media to the new. But eventually, sad to say, we'll die off. Will members of younger generations, raised from childhood in the Internet culture of instant consumer gratification, click on Prof. Sunstein's government-aided deliberativedemocracy.com? Maybe—if some old fogey has given them a copy of this book.

PAUL M. BARRETT *is a senior editor with* The Wall Street Journal. *Many years ago, he spent a semester as a student of Cass Sunstein's.*

Valley of the Dollars

By Michael Oreskes

DRAMATIC ECONOMIC CHANGE—the move from farm to city, or from blue collar to white—has, generally speaking, been followed by substantial political realignment. Sara Miles sets herself no less a task than documenting such a realignment from the heartland of the "New Economy," Silicon Valley. Miles, a writer for *Wired* and other magazines, chooses as her focal point the efforts of Wade Randlett to raise money and organize support for Democrats among the Valley's venture capitalists, engineers, and entrepreneurs.

It is an intriguing idea, and there is much interesting material in this book as Miles escorts us through the anthropology of first contact between the alien cultures of cyberspace and the Beltway.

"Fifty years from now, Silicon Valley will be more powerful than Washington, but people in Washington don't see it yet," the head of a software firm confides to her. The hubris is breathtaking, and well-recorded by Miles. This ignorance and naiveté about government and politics gives another meaning to digital divide. At one point, Rep. Anna Eshoo of California's fourteenth district is touring Synopsys, a software firm, and is offered a briefing on how the firm's product automates chip-making:

"'We've replaced RTL code with behavioral compilers,' began a 28-year-old engineer named Tony Dimalanta,

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launching his show-and-tell in a small cubicle. The congresswoman stared somewhat blankly at a screen full of algorithms. Dimalanta clicked on a flow chart ... 'Now this is awesome,' he continued. 'Tony,' Eshoo interrupted. 'Tell me, who is your Representative?'

"Dimalanta blushed like a ninth-grader caught day-dreaming by his social studies teacher. 'Uh, I don't actually know,' he said."

HOW TO HACK A PARTY LINE: The Democrats and Silicon Valley
by Sara Miles
Basic Books, $27.00

In Miles' telling, Silicon Valley views politics as a system that needs debugging. Congress, one engineer tells her, is not logical. Politics is about getting things done, not about making hard choices or resolving competing interests. Now in fairness, a lot of 28-year-olds do not know who their representatives are. But in the past, most of them weren't millionaires. Which is where Wade Randlett enters the picture. An ambitious, driven young man, he sensed an opportunity to tap the burgeoning wealth of the high-tech industries to build political influence in the Democratic party, although whether he's motivated for his industry or for himself remains a little fuzzy.

Miles sensed an opportunity, too. "I saw Wade Randlett as the guy who could be the pivot point for the major political realignment that was under way in the Democratic Party," she writes. "He wasn't the most important figure in politics or high-tech by any means, but he occupied an incredibly interesting position bridging the two." A book deal was born.

But a book deal is one thing, a book quite something more. Miles is impressive on the political culture of Silicon Valley, or the lack thereof. When she writes about Randlett and his cohorts on their home turf, I feel that I am there. But her grasp of Washington is another matter. When she writes about the Beltway end of things, I feel I'm getting a rewrite of *National Journal* clips.

Is there in fact a realignment going on in the Democratic Party? A lot of people have worked for it. Bill Clinton hopes he is leaving America at least that, although he probably would not have even made it to the end of his term without those pesky Old Democrats. But all that Miles establishes is that the idea of realignment is being used as a fund-raising tool to convince Silicon Valley millionaires that their success does not automatically mean they should be Republicans.

So what we actually have here is another in a long train of books about fund raising. A worthy subject, to be sure, and here, too, Miles has a wonderful ear. "I want to make sure that you understand we don't think of Silicon Valley as an ATM," Rep. Cal Dooley told a room full of Silicon Valley executives convened by Randlett. Their confusion on this point would be understandable, given how hard Randlett and his crew had milked them.

This book might have worked better if Miles had kept her focus more tightly on Randlett and on scenes, such as the ones with Reps. Eshoo and Dooley that we witness by following Randlett around. But like the Internet, facts and ideas of all sorts fly across the pages of this book—often out of context, incomplete, or only partially reported.

Randlett himself is not developed fully enough as a character, given how central he is to the book. For example, my quick survey of the clip file shows he first came to notoriety for refusing as an undergraduate to sign Princeton's honor code. Surely that episode reveals something about him, but it is not even mentioned in this book. We are told late in the book that his goals have been at least partly thwarted by his own difficult personality. But despite all the access Miles had to him, we learn about this not from watching him, but from hearing displeasure with him reported back by other sources.

Given Al Gore's shaky showing in the campaign of 2000, there is a missed opportunity in this book. Randlett, and the Democratic sympathizers he works with, start out quite supportive of Mr. Gore. But by the end of the book, as the election approaches, Miles finds considerable disillusionment with the Democratic party's first high-tech candidate for president. Having a Palm Pilot apparently was not enough.

But what went wrong? A really close look at how Gore lost support in Silicon Valley might have shed some light on this election. But what we mostly get are reports about how his campaign was confused and the candidate did not call except when he wanted money. I could have told you that from reading the newspaper.

There is a bigger conceptual problem with this book. Watching as high-tech industries try to push their way towards political influence is a smart idea. But Silicon Valley is probably the last place from which to get a clear view of the overall impact the new economy will have on American politics. It is a bit like hanging out with automakers in Detroit, circa 1946, to understand how suburbanization will change American politics.

So the book overpromises. But Miles has a keen eye and a sharp pen (sharp keyboard just doesn't do it) for the clash between the cultures of Silicon Valley and Washington, a clash that does hint at much about our future. At the height of impeachment, she notes, no one in Silicon Valley seemed to be paying much attention while, as she puts it, from a Beltway politician's point of view, "the information age was notable mainly for having unleashed Matt Drudge upon the world."

MICHAEL ORESKES *is the assisting managing editor for electronic news at* The New York Times.

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True Crime

By Stephanie Mencimer

During the mid-1990s, I often found myself spending Saturday nights driving around in a patrol car in sketchy areas of Washington, D.C., taking in the sights with my boyfriend, a D.C. cop. Most of what I saw was a D.C. police department in a shambles. The city was in the midst of a crushing financial crisis, and it had failed to invest in the police department's infrastructure for years.

By 1995, scout cars were dropping wheels, brakes, and mufflers left and right, and the department couldn't afford to fix them. Station parking lots were littered with dead and disabled patrol cars, and officers showing up for work often would find that they had nothing to drive. They were using their own money to gas up their cruisers. Neighborhood groups held bake sales to raise money to buy toilet paper, radio batteries, and other critical supplies for local district station houses.

My friend's 4th District station was furnished like a 1950's schoolhouse, full of old desks, wooden chairs, and not much else. Officers used rotary phones—voice mail was unheard of, as were computers. When the station did get a few 486s, most officers didn't know what to do with them. They didn't have e-mail, and there was no central network for filing reports. All the crime reports were done by hand, on paper, and later sent to headquarters for processing.

The D.C. cops' crime fighting tactics weren't much more sophisticated. Officers would race from one crime scene to another in response to radio calls, doing very little in the way of proactive policing. I was amazed they ever caught any criminals—and most of them didn't. Ten percent of the officers made 90 percent of the department's arrests.

In the midst of all the chaos, after work my cop friend and his buddies would sit around a pitcher of beer at the Fraternal Order of Police clubhouse and talk shop. Their conversations frequently turned to the other police departments around the country that they considered *real* police departments. Number one on their list was the NYPD.

To D.C. cops, the New York Police Department was the shit. It had Compstat, the state-of-the-art technology system that connected all the various districts to headquarters and allowed precinct commanders to call up maps showing the latest crime trends on their beats, helping them shut down trouble spots before they got out of hand. New York also had William Bratton, the famed former transit cop chief who had cleaned up the New York subway system by applying the "broken window" theory to policing.

NEW YORK MURDER MYSTERY: The True Story Behind the Crime Crash of the 1990s
by Andrew Karmen
New York University Press, $27.95

The broken window theory was coined by criminologist George Kelling, who had shown that neighborhoods that neglected little things like broken windows and litter invited more serious criminal activity into their midst.

Consequently, Bratton encouraged transit cops to crack down on small crimes, like turnstile jumping and panhandling, based on the belief that people who commit minor crimes also commit serious ones. The practice seemed to work beautifully, and Bratton became something of a celebrity. He became the NYPD police commissioner in 1994, and the number of murders in the city plummeted by almost 800 the next year. Suddenly other cities, including D.C., were clamoring to implement their own Bratton systems.

Naturally, he was happy to promote his ideas. (In 1996, Giuliani pushed Bratton out and the former commissioner took his act on the road as a consultant.) In 1998, Bratton wrote a memoir called *Turnaround: How America's Top Cop Reversed the Crime Epidemic*, taking credit for New York's 10 percent annual crime rate drops for the two years he served as commissioner. Jack Maple, the gourmand cop in a bow tie and derby who served as Bratton's deputy, also wrote his own book in 1999 (called *The Crime Fighter: Putting the Bad Guys Out of Business*) claiming the lion's share of the credit for the New York crime drop.

Conservatives, too, jumped on the bandwagon, eager to declare New York proof positive that their law-and-order theories were valid, and that liberals' belief that such mushy things as alleviating poverty could reduce crime were intellectually bankrupt.

The funny thing, though, was that New York wasn't the only place the crime rate was falling; a similar phenomenon was taking place in D.C. Despite the sorry state of D.C.'s police force, the number of murders in the city fell from 482 in 1991 to 260 in 1998. That coincidence didn't keep the New York police brass from taking credit for turning the city around, though.

It was their claims—and the doubt cast on them by cities like D.C.—that prompted criminologist Andrew Karmen to take a closer look at New York City's 1990's "Crime Crash." In his new book, *New York Murder Mystery*, Karmen, a professor at John Jay College of Criminal Justice, deconstructs New York's falling murder rate, working under the old premise that "Politicians use statistics like drunks use lamp posts: for support, not illumination."

Karmen is no stranger to the crime reduction controversy. His refusal to validate the claims made by folks like Bratton and Maple earned him the scorn of much of the New York media—which relished quoting him so others could bash him as an outdated, soft-on-crime liberal. Karmen's background as a campus antiwar activist in the 1960s made him an easy target. At one point, the editorial board of the *New York Post* railed against the "Andrew Karmens of the world, who seem to believe that 'social forces' or lunar cycles or some such nonsense, are the most important factors affecting crime."

The debate over New York's crime reduction is similar to the debate currently underway about who is responsible for the economic boom. There are so many possible variables, each loaded with political overtones. But one by one, Karmen picks apart the various assertions that have been used to explain the "outbreak of better behavior that swept across the City" in the last half on the 1990s. He debunks the overwhelming majority of them.

Karmen starts by examining the murders themselves, looking for patterns to explain who was no longer being killed when the body count dropped. Here, you won't be surprised to learn, he deduces that most of New York's killers are not serial killers or child abductors

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but poor, young black men, as are their victims, and that a good number of the murders are drug-related.

He then examines the changes at work within the NYPD. Karmen quickly refutes the notion that Compstat and the management changes that came with it could have accounted for such a quick and steep drop in crime. The crime rates in New York were already falling before the system was implemented.

Before finishing the book, I would have bet that Karmen would identify the booming economy as responsible for the crime drop, but he doesn't. Looking at data from the Census Bureau and other sources, Karmen finds that poverty actually intensified in black and Hispanic neighborhoods at the same time the body counts fell substantially.

Karmen also discounts another theory in vogue right now, which attributes the nation's crime drop to the huge number of people the U.S. has put behind bars over the past decade. New York also has not led the country in either its incarceration rate or prison expansion. Even when its inmate population did grow during the late 1970s and late 1980s, the crime rates did not fall.

So you're thinking, if it's not the incarceration rate and it's not the economy, it had to be the waning crack epidemic, right? But Karmen puts the kabosh on that idea as well, with data showing that the crack epidemic declined as much in Philadelphia as it did in New York without producing the same effect on the murder rate. And the overall proportion of New York arrestees with cocaine and heroin in their systems did not dramatically decline during the 1990s. Drug overdose deaths diminished, but hospital emergency room episodes increased, and the police continued to make large numbers of drug arrests throughout the decade—evidence, Karmen suggests, that New York's drug trade continued to thrive even while the murder rate was plummeting.

In the end, Karmen concludes that four major factors had a significant impact on the homicide rates in New York in the '90s: higher education, immigration, demographics, and, for lack of a better term, death.

The demographics come right out of Criminology 101, which teaches that crime waves occur when cities reach a critical mass of people at high risk to commit crimes, usually poor, young, black and Hispanic men. In New York, the number of poor minority young men fell significantly during the '90s, especially the 20-to-24-year-olds, whose numbers fell 19 percent.

Aside from the demographics, Karmen also credits the city's long-term social investment in low-cost college education for city residents. Noting the inverse relationship between college education and criminal behavior, Karmen writes that exposure to higher education "not only lowers the odds of committing murder but even reduces the chances of getting killed." Residents of New York, including low-income black and Hispanic folks, were more likely to have attended college and to have completed a degree than their counterparts in most other American cities.

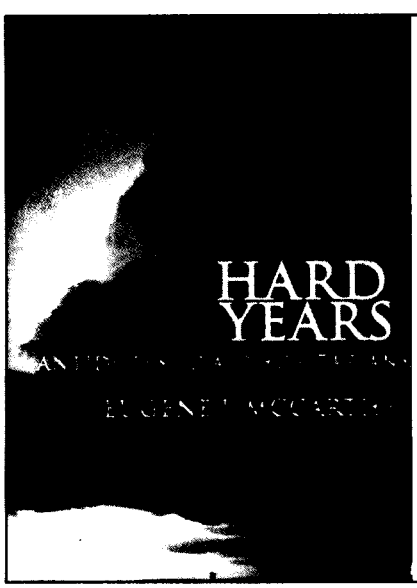
Karmen convincingly presents the facts behind these two concurrent trends, but his case for the relationship between them reads suspiciously like the wishful thinking of the City University of New York professor that Karmen is.

More credibly, Karmen concludes that the huge wave of immigration that swept through New York in the '90s was tremendously beneficial for the city as a whole. Far from bringing criminals into the city, as conservatives often argued, immigration actually has helped preserve the city's tax base by replacing the middle class who fled during the "bad old days" with poor but motivated foreign immigrants. Immigrants, at least first-generation immigrants, according to Karmen, also tend to commit fewer crimes than other poor folks.

Karmen's other conclusion is more grim—and it hardly presents a model other cities would want to replicate. He finds that, essentially, the ghetto really is self-cleansing. The combination of a lot of homicides, a lot of drug overdoses, and the scourge of AIDS among IV drug users, (along with the deportation of a few criminal aliens) eliminated about 43,000 active lawbreakers from the city streets during the last decade—enough to put a big dent in the crime rate.

While Karmen's findings in New York are illuminating, he never really says whether the factors that led to the drop in murders in New York also contributed to the drop in say, D.C., or San Diego, where homicides dropped off almost as much as they did in New York. It's hard to imagine that those same forces were at work in D.C. at least. The District lost a larger proportion of its population than New York over the past decade, and immigrants coming to the area generally have quickly decamped to the suburbs. The District also has very little to offer in the way of higher education for poor people. Then again, murders in the District didn't fall nearly as far as they did in New York, where the body count dropped 72 percent in seven years.

And that's Karmen's point, too: New York is a unique place and trying to use it as a model applicable to any-



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where else is frequently a foolish enterprise. In the end, he convincingly demonstrates that no single factor created the New York Miracle—not Bratton, not Maple, not even Giuliani. The 1990s were simply a time when a number of trends happened to merge all at once. Karmen's answer seems right, though hardly satisfying—or even especially useful for the future. That's critical, because New York may be in for another tough ride: Even as the NYPD is basking in the glow of its success, Karmen notes, the murder rate is going up again.

Chromosome Clips

By Steve Olson

COULD A JOURNALIST WORKING entirely from news accounts write an effective history of the war in Vietnam before the fall of Saigon? That's the kind of task Kevin Davies has set himself in *Cracking the Genome: Inside the Race to Unlock Human DNA*. For the past 12 years, an international consortium has been methodically deriving the sequence of the 3 billion nucleotides that make up the human genome. The pace of sequencing picked up appreciably a few years ago when a U.S. company, Celera Genomics, vowed to do the job much faster, partly as a way to secure commercial rights to valuable genetic information.

Neither sequencing effort is finished. A hyped-up news conference last summer to celebrate the "completion" of the sequencing had more to do with politics, patenting, and the stock market than with science. Celera and the international genome project are both still filling in gaps and correcting errors. Given the difficulties that are anticipated in the final stages of sequencing, it will probably be necessary at some point to declare victory and walk away.

Davies does an excellent job of summarizing the last dozen years of genetics news. He has read everything he possibly can about James Watson, the co-discoverer with Francis Crick of the structure of DNA and the first director of the U.S. government's genome program; Francis Collins, a former University of Michigan researcher who took over the genome program in 1993; and Craig Venter, a researcher who left the National Institutes of Health to found first the privately funded Institute for Genomic Research and later Celera. Davies must have filing cabinets full of articles about the competition between the government and Celera, and the potential uses of sequence data. Unfortunately, the book reads more like a fantastically detailed clip job than like a coherent story.

CRACKING THE GENOME: Inside the Race to Unlock Human DNA
by Kevin Davies
Free Press, $25.00

Davies tries to put events in context but is prone to rampant overenthusiasm. Sequencing the genome is alternately described as a "staggering achievement," "the defining moment in the evolution of mankind," "the greatest adventure of modern science," and "the sacred birthright of humanity." It is compared to the invention of the wheel, the realization that the Earth goes around the sun, the Apollo moon landings, and finally understanding "the language of God" (to which I replied, in the margins of my copy of the book, "Not my God").

Actually, the sequencing of the human genome hasn't been any of these things. It has been a classic case of bureaucratic science, the ultimate piece of grind-it-out biology. Deriving the sequence has not been an act of inspired creativity, like Einstein's development of relativity theory, or even Watson and Crick's discovery of the structure of DNA in 1953. If the human genome hadn't been more or less sequenced last year, it would have been sequenced this year, or next year. As soon as the tools needed to do the job became available, it had to be done.

In that respect, Collins, Watson, and Venter come across more as bureaucrats than as scientists. Their job has been to marshal the troops and spin the press, with an occasional stop by the lab to see how things are going. Davies could have written a book of bureaucratic intrigue, full of oversized egos and scheming subordinates. Instead, he has chosen to focus tightly on the science.

The most interesting part of the story has been Craig Venter's contribution to the sequencing effort, and Davies covers this material well. Venter realized in the early 1990s that the approach being taken by the government was much too conservative. He had several very good ideas about how to do things differently. Fortunately, he was able to find financial backers with pockets deep enough to implement his ideas. And, even more fortunately, his ideas worked.

In the process, Venter was forced to move from the public sector to the private sector, where he had no choice but to try to make money from his work. That raised the ire of his former colleagues, though they would have done exactly the same thing if their positions had been reversed. Venter returned their criticism with scorn, and the science press, usually relegated to colorless stories of receptors and clinical trials, egged on everyone in the conflict to get the best copy possible.

I began this book thinking it would go well beyond what has been reported in the press. As Davies tells us in the very first paragraph, he was the inaugural editor of *Nature Genetics*, an offshoot of the prestigious British science journal *Nature*. He knows the people he's writing about and has published some of their important papers. He should have been able to call them and ask them whatever he wanted. He appears, however, to have written the book having rarely left the library. All this information in a single document is useful, but one gets the sense of an opportunity missed.

Sometimes the writing seems rushed, perhaps in an effort to keep the book as current as possible. Definitions, characterizations, and jokes get repeated. Especially grating is Davies's tendency to describe complicated people with one-term labels: irrepressible, heroic, intellectual, charming.

Still, Davies really does know his biology. His descriptions are clear and accurate. His judgements about what to include and what to exclude are sound. He has a good sense of how the pieces of his story fit together. Chapters that describe the sequencing effort are interspersed with chapters that tell how genetic data are being used, and all are full of information.

If you've been meaning to read all those stories about molecular biology and haven't gotten around to it, this is the perfect book to help you get up to date. But if you want an inside account of what will certainly be a milestone in science, I counsel patience. Davies' book

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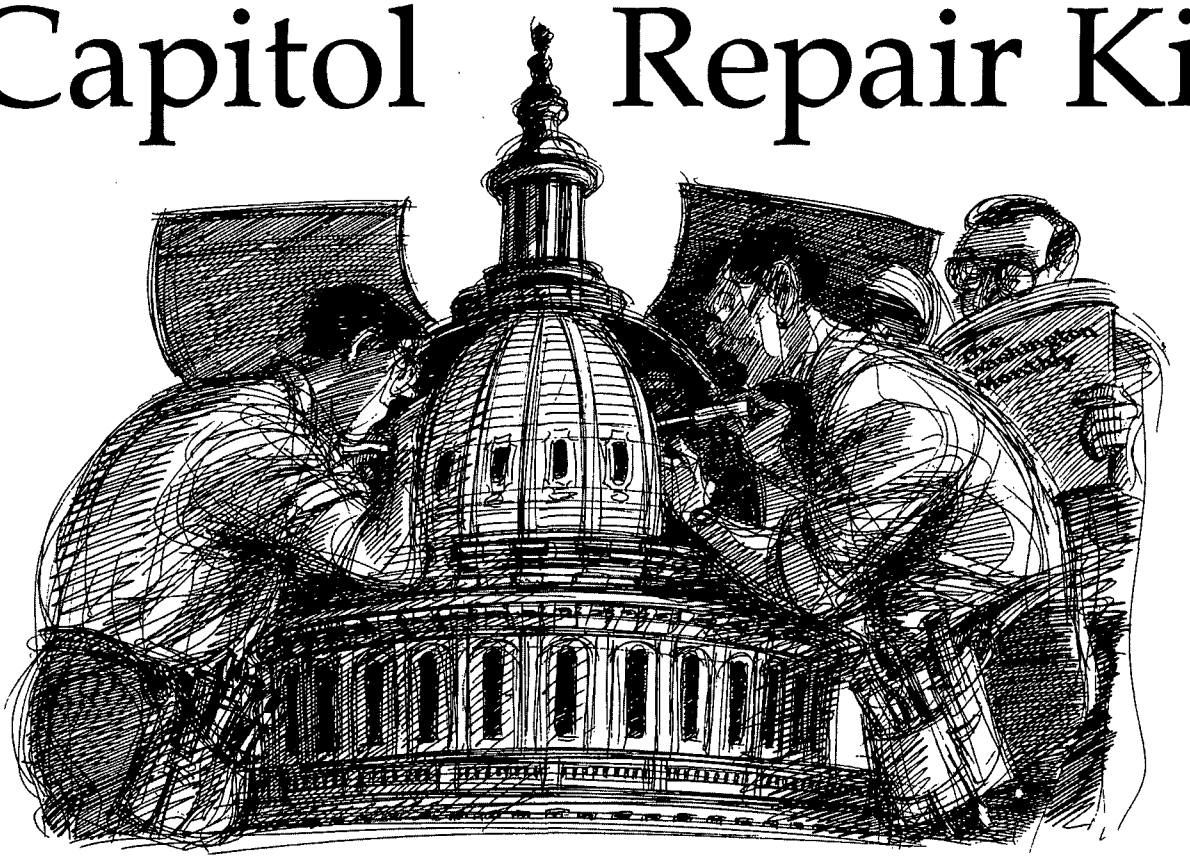

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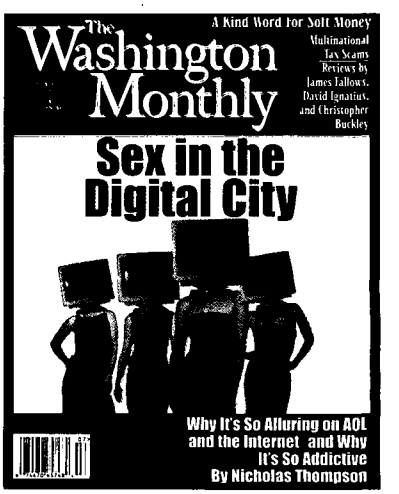

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is the first to describe in detail "the race to unlock human DNA." There will be many more.

STEVE OLSON *has written about science for* The Atlantic Monthly, Science, *and other magazines.*

Gettin' Lucky With Greenspan

By Noam Scheiber

THE OPENING CHAPTER OF BOB Woodward's *Maestro* is riveting stuff. It is October of 1987, barely two months into Alan Greenspan's tenure at the Federal Reserve, and the chairman is in Dallas for a routine speaking engagement. Concerned about the market's Monday-morning doldrums, Greenspan checks in with a local Fed official shortly after arriving. The official offers a perfunctory response—"down five oh eight"—in which Greenspan finds a measure of relief. Then the official clarifies: the market is not down 5.08 points. It's down 508 points.

It turns out Woodward has parachuted us right into Black Monday, the biggest one-day slide in stock market history. But not to worry. With panic swirling around him—White House Chief of Staff Howard Baker whimpering like an incontinent lap dog, New York Fed President William Corrigan spewing invectives ("Alan, you're it ... Goddammit, it's up to you!")—Greenspan not only saves the day, he does so with Bond-like panache. This, of course, is the genius of Alan Greenspan.

But it's worth considering exactly what Greenspan does here. As far as I can tell from Woodward's account, it's only two things: one, issue a one-sentence public statement that seems to calm the markets; and two, mastermind a last-ditch plan that would guarantee payments between financial institutions (a lapse in those payments could have unraveled the entire financial system). The first strikes me as a no-brainer—what else do you do if you're the Fed chairman?—even though the insiders Woodward later quotes call it "brilliant." The second turned out to be irrelevant. As it happened, the market reversed course when a handful of Wall Street players bought $60 million in futures contracts the following afternoon. To this day, Greenspan still doesn't know who organized it.

And this, in a nutshell, is the problem with *Maestro*. Where Woodward's Greenspan cuts an Olympian figure, the real Greenspan was just a bright guy with better-than-average instincts. He has no special insight into the world that was changing around him and, in the end, he simply benefited from favorable forces beyond his control. Woodward is right that the story of the Greenspan era is the story of 1987 writ large. He's just wrong about what happened in 1987.

MAESTRO: Greenspan's Fed and the American Boom
by Bob Woodward
Simon & Schuster, $25.00

Needless to say, someone intent on taking a critical view of Greenspan wouldn't suffer for lack of material. Take early 1994. Despite few indications of inflation as unemployment fell, signs we now recognize as the rumbling of a new economy, Greenspan's Fed clung to the same model that had informed central banking for years. The key to that model is what economists call the non-accelerating inflation rate of unemployment, the point beyond which further reductions in unemployment tend to trigger inflation, and beyond which central bankers tend to get interest-rate happy.

Of course, the funny thing about a new era is that you don't know it's new while you're in it. At least not right away. Given that ignorance, Greenspan did what any reasonable human being would do: He played by the rules he thought were in place.

Still, as time went on, unemployment continued to fall and inflation remained at bay. As Woodward tells it, this moved some to argue that the traditional model no longer applied, and that a continued drop in unemployment didn't necessarily spell trouble. Yet Greenspan was unconvinced. (In fact, he squeezed one proponent of this view out of the vice chairmanship of the Fed.) The Fed doubled interest rates between 1994 and 1996.

To be sure, that policy ultimately bought the Fed the credibility to lay off interest-rate hikes when it finally realized they weren't necessary. But it's tough to imagine Greenspan anticipating this benefit at the time. Yet Woodward not only praises Greenspan for the approach, he further credits it with what's known as a soft landing, essentially prolonging an expansion by slowing it down. It may have. But, if so, there's no question Greenspan benefited from a bit of dumb luck along the way. Had this been an ordinary expansion rather than the product of a revolution in information technology, the only thing Greenspan's interest rate hikes would have softened was Clinton's approval ratings. (George Bush is still convinced Greenspan cost him reelection by raising interest rates in 1991.)

Not that Woodward's account entirely misses the point. Perhaps no less important than Greenspan's Fed stewardship was his role as an economic adviser. And Woodward does readers a service by pointing out that it was Greenspan, along with Lloyd Bentsen and Robert Rubin, who gave Clinton the best piece of advice he received as president: Eliminate the deficit and Wall Street will reward you with lower long-term interest rates and subsequent economic growth.

That said, Woodward is ultimately the wrong man to write a definitive history of the Greenspan era. His treatment of economic issues, while nominally correct, betrays the sort of shallow understanding you'd get from a Texas governor in a presidential debate. Economic concepts get thrown around like names of obscure foreign leaders—often incorrectly, though these are, of course, forgivable offenses. Less forgivable are the deeper questions that go unresolved at best, and unraised at worst. (Is the Fed's only legitimate objective stable prices, or should it actively promote economic growth as well? Should the Fed have a long-term game plan or should it proceed blindly from one Federal Open Market Committee meeting to the next, as it seemed to under Greenspan?) And then there's the biggest question of all: Is it Greenspan we should thank for our historical economic success? On this question, Woodward altogether whiffs.

NOAM SCHEIBER *is a reporter at* The New Republic.

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The Story of Gold
One of a Series

Of Dollars and Gold

Over the past year, demand for the U.S. Mint's new "golden dollar" coin exceeded all expectations. Yet many Americans still have not seen it. How come? According to the Mint, people are holding on to the new coins as collector's items instead of using them.

One reason is that this is a particularly interesting coin. It features the young Shoshone Indian heroine, Sacajawea, who acted as guide and translator for the Lewis and Clark expedition to Oregon in the early 1800s.

The new coin has been heavily promoted as the "golden dollar," which may increase its appeal to many who do not realize that "golden" refers only to its color, not its content. It is actually made of a copper alloy.

But the "golden" name and the instant popularity of the new coin serve as a reminder of the valuable role that real gold has played throughout the centuries – and still plays today – in providing a stable foundation for national currencies.

This role may become even more important in the new millennium, according to leading monetary economist Robert A. Mundell of Columbia University in New York. Professor Mundell was awarded the 1999 Nobel Prize in Economic Sciences for his pioneering research and analyses, including his "almost prophetic accuracy" in predicting future monetary developments.

In accepting the Nobel award, Mundell noted that since Roman times gold has provided the standard for national currencies. It reduced the risk that inflation would decrease a currency's value and "provided a link between values in one generation and century to those in others." Since going off the gold standard, he pointed out, most national currencies have lost purchasing power.

Looking into the future, Mundell predicts that the value of gold – the only commodity still held as a reserve asset by central banks – is likely to rise from around $270 a troy ounce today to approximately $500 an ounce over the next decade.

With around one billion ounces of gold still in central bank reserves, "gold is going to remain an important and increasingly valuable reserve asset for a long time to come."

Which brings us back to the U.S. Mint and its "golden dollars." With inflation, these bright new coins could lose not only their luster, but up to 20 to 25 percent of their purchasing power over the next ten years.

Yet if the Mint's new dollar coins were *really* made of gold, their value could increase approximately 100 percent over the same period, according to Professor Mundell. A sizeable difference.

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